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ROUGH JUSTICE

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ROUGH JUSTICE

By

C. E. MONTAGUE

CHATTO AND WINDUS
LONDON

First published March 1926
Ninth printing February 1930
First issued in the Phoenix Library
1929; reprinted 1930

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To

THE MEMORY OF

F. F. M.

WHO DIED ON

OCTOBER 30, 1925

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER I

I

THOUGH Auberon was only about to be born to Thomas and Winifred Garth, there was already one bundle of mottled pink flesh and white wool and blue overalls rising and falling and tumbling about on the sunburnt lawn of the Chantry, their house by the Thames.

This energetic person was Molly; and she, too, was a Garth, though not near akin to her guardian Thomas, the last of many Thomas and Auberon Garths to own this agreeable dwelling. Three years had passed since a foot light-heartedly placed on a step imperfectly cut on the iced Brenva Ridge of Mont Blanc had slipped out of that step. This lapse had extinguished both Molly's parents together. A gifted lawyer had tried to make out that Molly's mother had had time to inherit the very small wealth of her husband, under his will; that she had enjoyed its possession for quite a few seconds, and then died intestate. But how could you tell? No one had seen the young couple finished except their two Courmayeur guides, and these were killed too. Anyhow, from first to last, a minute had sufficed to make the infant Molly an orphan in the most liberal sense of the word. The state of the bodies showed that.

During that minute Thomas and Winifred Garth had been sunk fathoms deep in a mystic joy that was flooding their honeymoon month in the neighbouring Valais. The two were quite unpractically tender in conscience as well as in heart; so the news that reached them in the murmurous cool of a fine midsummer twilight, under the cherry-trees of Vissoye, came like a reproachful summons: Molly, the tiny third cousin at home, became, as it were, a frail gong on which a brute blow had been struck to call them away from

a felicity too solely their own. Away they posted, over the main ridge of the Alps, to bury the unrecognisable dead and to provide for the wailing families of the guides, and then home to England, to patch up, as well as they could, the world that had come to pieces under the unconscious Molly.

They carried her off, to keep as their own, and Molly, a good-humoured soul, seemed to bless this arrangement by beaming upon them at sight. Bereaved too soon to pick up any mawkish tricks of self-pity, she had gone cheerfully on, ever since, with the tall enterprise of life; she had ruled her adoptive parents, upon the whole, justly and clemently; though she might still be too young to size up her new home in a critical spirit, she bore it at least the great love that any young foal full of health will bear to any field that it is used to.

II

It was a goodly abode, if you were not fussy about a few fogs in winter and flies in hot summers, nor wedded too much to the latest fashions in "sporting estates" and "good social neighbourhoods." It was a small Tudor mansion of mottled red brick, built just about 1550, and time and the weather had worked on it well; like old wine and old paintings, its walls had the deep-hearted glow that has to be slowly amassed—a sort of savings put patiently by, out of many years' income of sunshine. More door and window than wall, the river front of the house lay as open as summer itself on the midsummer day of Auberon's birth: house and garden grew into each other; indoors and out, you got the good of them both; you passed, without any sense of a break, from rooms that smelt of roses more than the garden itself, out to a terrace more cheerfully littered with papers and books than the rooms you had left. Winifred Garth had left them as they lay, to take to her bed.

As the house melted into the garden, the garden melted

into wide England beyond. Over the low brick wall at the riverside edge of the lawn, seeds of the gardeners' flowers had blown out for centuries, autumn by autumn, on to the tussocky outer turf that the tide watered twice daily; so there was no rigid frontier, with sunflowers all on one side and marsh-marigolds all on the other. House and garden, garden and foreshore, the old and august thoroughfare of the Thames and the green stretch of Surrey beyond it were all members one of another.

The house stood at an elbow and looked, up and down, along two of the highest tidal reaches of Thames. Thomas Garth looked numbly up and down them during his vigil of torment and fear in the garden that Winifred had left. Up stream, among trees, there lay all that is left to this day of the house where, they say, Queen Elizabeth died. Black against the sky in the north-east there stood the big lion *passant* aloft on the roof of the cubical monkish palace to which Charles the Second fled from the Plague. The elms that walled the north end of the garden rooted among the stones of one of the votive chantries that Henry the Fifth, as he is reported by Shakespeare, cannily mentioned to God in his prayers before Agincourt: Garth's house itself had taken its name from some old connection with one of these disestablished houses of prayer, and he would cheerfully have sold his all to found another to-day if he could have hoped that God ever took tips to make you top dog in a fight or to see your wife safely through childbirth. No good; nothing for it but waiting and gazing, with eyes that saw nothing at all, at the shining highway at the foot of the garden, where Lady Jane Grey had gone down on the ebb to the Tower and Dr. Johnson had come up on the top of the tide to dine with Mr. Cambridge at Richmond. Over the flat square mile of meadow beyond the river, once marsh and then deer-park and now grazed by horses and sheep, black-

haired primitive man from the Mediterranean and yellow-haired primitive man from the Elbe had picked their way in turn, each full of magnificent hopes, towards the great ford of Thames a mile lower down stream. Everything here was scrolled and emblazoned with anciently. Garth had loved, all his life, that quality of the place. But what was the good of it now — and Winifred dying, perhaps?

Perhaps there really was, apart from this lover's fears, a delicate smell of death—at any rate, of unsuccess—about the dignified landscape before him. Whatever figure this parish of Gistleham, once the Domesday manor or vill of that name, had once cut in the world, it was all over now. For about a century past it had been losing slowly the stir of life at full pressure. Progress seemed to have missed this part of the Thames when she whirled past, a short mile away to the north, along the Great West Road and, later, the Great Western Railway. Scarcely ten miles lay between the Garths' house and mid-London. The city's glow showed turbidly red, of a night, on the under side of the clouds. But the hum of life that used to be heard from the Chantry lawn by old Auberon Garth, father of Thomas, had long been sinking. It was the second time this had happened, but now it sank more gently than it had done when a Norman king who liked a little shooting converted the Saxon village into a part of his new deer-forest of Staines. Fashion had carried the pleasure-boats off to the more affluent waters above the first lock. The big Georgian inn, "The London Apprentice," faced appealingly down stream towards the faithless capital, its name commemorating the vanished jollities of distant generations of city youth in its now empty chambers. Gistleham had decayed with the old barge traffic up river from London. Each year the leisurely rumble and dip of big sculls came at longer intervals

to the ear from the public ferry just above the Chantry garden; and each year it was rarer to hear the little dry rattle of stone upon wood as road metal was slowly unloaded by hand from a barge into a cart at the village wharf, which was now too large for its work.

"Just the place for the Garths," Colin March used to say—and he was a cousin of theirs: he should know. "Thomas Garth is the one authentic Conservative still left in Britain. He's like the only surviving wild cat in the Highlands. All the Garths were like that, I believe. The one poor, Whiggish thing they ever did was to plant that great beech on their lawn—new-fangled sort of a tree—only brought in by the Romans. No doubt it was the unpopular thing to do at the time—so they did it. They have been keeping their eyes off the main chance—cutting it dead—since history started. They wouldn't turn Protestant under Henry the Eighth, lest he should give them an abbey and beeves; they waited till they were sure to get into trouble by doing it *temp.* James the Second. I fancy they built this house on the river so as to keep a watch on the tides—lest they should ever take one at the flood and be led on to fortune."

Colin talks like that. You mustn't mind *him.* Anyhow, however much Garth liked the beautiful place which had not done very well for itself in these times, it did him no good now—perhaps it made him ache worse, like still sunshine on some day when you bury a friend.

III

Garth as she was, Molly could not be reasonably charged at that moment with any insensate love of the past. At a yellow-barred nursery window above, her face appeared now and then, grave, excited and restless. I fancy her whole soul was plunging freely into the future. She was to "have

a brother"—for Nurse appeared to have settled already the sex of this expected immigrant.

Of course that was a rousing year altogether, if you were still pretty young at the time. All old and worn-out things were being swept out of the way at a quite breathless pace. Almost unthinkable marvels of daring and wit were adding extra oxygen to the air we all breathed. Music-halls and universities were drumming with the deep reverberations of "Ta-ra-ra-*boom*-de-ay," that jolliest of tunes, the last word of youth's happy contempt for the deafness of age to the clear and loud call of life. A choir of young poets, tremendous fellows, were drinking themselves to death, with great devotion, lest some movement worthy of the name of Decadence should fail to signalise the deathbed of a century. The safety bicycle had just descended from Heaven, to make women free of the road. For the first time in history Scots were permitting the amateur champion at golf to come into being upon a course not in Scotland. It was a prince of years—all changes and stir.

And yet—well, the greatness of an event is said to reside in the mind of him, or her, who is stirred by it. If so, comets certainly ought to have blazed in the midnight sky above Molly's cot on the Midsummer Eve which was the eve, too, of Auberon's advent. As for Thomas and Winifred Garth the gold boom and the death of the Prince and the general election itself paled down to nothing beside the great nativity. It was to them a re-beginning of time, a re-birth of themselves. For they were simple; they longed naïvely for their first-born; it never occurred to their minds to take their promotion to parenthood as either a nuisance or a trifle.

IV

In Molly's bosom hope and desire may well have been flecked with some doubts not easily dismissible. How big

would the new comrade be? And of what temper? What line would he take, on the great issues? That of a leal true ally? Or that of a Claude Barbason, who had come to tea on Molly's last birthday and, after the meal, had grabbed all Molly's toys and then sat inert in a corner, hoarding the spoil and glowering darkly, sated with possession and yet joyless, a grim enigma to the friendly and ingenuous owner of the sequestrated property? Hope and anxiety fought visibly in her flushed face when at last she was led into Mother's room, to inspect the recruit.

Disappointment, at that age, is past all disguising. How is Hope to keep her countenance when her whole face has just been battered in? Molly came and saw, and the sight conquered her. Doubtless she had expected too much—had looked for a lad of inches, parts and mettle, fit from the first to jump in, as they say, and take hold; a red hand in the foray upon the big strawberry-bed; a counsellor sage to assist in maturing Molly's darling scheme for climbing up into the little copper beech-tree in the meadow and then dropping, all astride, from a convenient bough on to the bare back of the Shetland pony as he grazed. Vain hope! The chimeras that we pursue!

The recruit was deplorable. Quantity, quality, everything was lacking. Molly warily touched with the tip of one finger the swarthy red skin of the comatose and damp-haired animalcule. Then she snatched the finger away. It had not been burned. That was something. But oh the limitations of the creature! Molly felt about for its feet, through that futile imposture, its very long robe. Worse and worse! Its wretched legs came down hardly any distance at all. "Having a brother!" So that was all it came to!

Molly looked so tragi-comic that Winifred Garth—then lying back, all slack and spent, on two pillows, her face

transparent with exhaustion and yet radiant with mere rest from pain and with another beatitude less definable—smiled at her ward fondly while tears of weakness and sympathy filled her own eyes, always the kindest that you can imagine. She was amazingly beautiful just then, with the transfiguration upon her that some women happy in their love and their motherhood show at such times. "Oh, Mollikin, don't mind so much," she pleaded. "Kiss me and, please, please, don't be disappointed. I know he isn't big, but he *will* grow, ever so much."

Molly melted helplessly at this, and they lay face to face for a good while, with the baby between them, in some sort of silent communion of mutual tenderness and comprehension. Then Molly had to go, Mother's nurse declaring firmly that now she must rest. "I s'pose," Molly said at the door, mastering firmly the painfulness of this thought, "he'll have his breakfas' here in your room every morning for kite a long time."

There was no gainsaying it.

V

One fire, we are told, drives out another's burning. During the next few weeks the mind of Molly seemed to be serving as a theatre for one of these dramas of expulsion. Presently her first ardour of disappointment appeared to be losing ground. Some less obviously reasonable flame was presumably winning the day. Molly became pensive, for whole minutes at a time. After one of these passages of thought she would ask her nurse, without saying to whom she referred, "Is he poor?" Whatever the answer might be, Molly would then subside into reverie. Thence she would sometimes emerge, later on, with the interjection, "Poor baby!" breathed in a tone of deepest commiseration. At last she fairly avowed to Mrs. Garth the revolution that

was now completed in her bosom. "I don' know," she said, "what makes me feel sorry for Baby. I always feel 's if he had somefing a-matter wif him. 'S if he wanted some food an' couldn't get it, or somefing."

There was really as little the matter with Auberon as there was with the infant Bacchus, if sculptors tell us the truth. Auberon had the massed good health of two thoroughbred stocks in neither of which had men or women lived quite softly or defiled the temple. He did with all his soul the whole duty of babies; he fed and slept with a will; he only cried so far as, at that time of life, to cry is a form of gymnastics or else the lawful ringing of a bell; in his bath he made the leg stroke of a frog with a verve that dissipated any doubt in the minds of Winifred and Thomas about the aquatic origin of man; when awake on the Chantry lawn, where he lived most of the day, sucking in air and light like a plant, he adored, with mighty chucklings and kickings of joy, thanks and praise, the soughing sound of the big beech, the poplars and the oaks, the muted roar of the distant weir, the dancing chequer-work of sunlight and shadow among blown boughs, the doings of birds and the faces of friends who looked down into his pram. Whatever nature might prompt Molly to fear, it was well with the child.

VI

Not until three years later did Molly's craving to mother the lesser creature get its grand chance. By that time Auberon was putting the tongue of Shakespeare and Milton to fairly free, if inexact, use. The lyric impulse of these masters, also, seemed to be moving him on the lovely last evening of June 1895, when he was lying flat on his back, in his mother's lap, after his bath. Naked and flushed all over with his own blossoming health and the level sunshine that let itself in through the tassels and leaves of wisteria and

vine that framed the nursery's western window, he fell to crooning up at the shining love in her face a birdlike overflow of rhythmic contentment:

"For Muvs is vevvy dear
And val-loo-abble to me."

At this the beautiful woman bending over him lost all control of the pain that infests the ecstasies of mothers. All of them, I suppose, are Madonnas; they live in the shadow of apprehended crucifixions. "Oh, Bron, Bron, my little son," she wailed, snatching him up in her arms to press him close to her breast, and rocking her chair in a way that, somehow, was like a wringing of hands. "To think that one day you'll be big, and then you won't want to lie on my lap any more!" It was all slipping away, the delight of having him tiny, the sight of his little green cap in the garden. Nobody else would ever love him enough when he was a man, and then worse times and worse would come, till some day he would lie on a bed, an old man and sick, and she not there, and no one able to reach him, shut up alone with pain. Not only after the death of her children must Rachel mourn; every year of their youth bereaves her of some dear thing that they were.

"Little babies! Little babies!" Winifred said in a kind of doting chant to her husband that night in the dark. "The feel of their skin! And the little smell! And the little heave as they breathe! And all their little needs that call to you!" Garth tried to soothe her with caresses. She spoke almost wildly.

There were unusual sounds in the house the next morning when Auberon went forth on his customary round, to inspect the delicious contents of life, before breakfast. And—more disturbing still—some usual sounds were not there. His mother, early up as a rule, was not to be seen. Nurse was

furtively crying and said that Mother was ill. Auberon caught sight of his father far off and ran back to Nurse in alarm. "What's the matter with Fahva?" he asked. "His face is so small!"

VII

Auberon was never exactly told what had happened, in so many words. But there was Molly's face to read, as well as the pinched and sunken one he had seen on his father. The white torment in these must have worked on Auberon pretty strongly. For, half-way through the first mid-day meal without Mother, he climbed down from his chair, like one urged by he could not tell what, walked round the table and, straining up on tiptoe, hugged each of the other two tightly round the neck with both arms and no words at all.

A strange thing was that they both seemed to be more sorry for him than for any one else. Molly whispered thickly, "I'll do every single thing I can. I promise." His father, not a profuse dealer in endearments, gathered Auberon into his arms convulsively, saying nothing, but stroking the child's hair very hard, with a kind of fierce fondness. Auberon had to look away from his father's face; its control of itself was too dreadful.

Only yesterday Garth had come hurrying home from a week in the North, where he had a seat to defend in the elections raging that summer. As he came leaping, three at a time, up the shallow white steps to the door, Auberon had stood expectant at the top and, postponing his own embraces, had said in a benignant tone of fatherly understanding, "Go into the dlaw'n'-room, Fahva. You'll find Muvva there." Now she had died in her sleep, without word or cry.

CHAPTER II

I

FOR the fifteen years before his wife died, Garth had been succeeding in life; so most people said. But a few had seen that there were seeds of failure lodged in him too. And now his light was out; and many seeds, it is known, will come up well in the dark.

Many good things had been his from the start—good birth and looks and manners, the will to work hard, money enough to give him his choice of work, but not enough to keep him employed as the flustered Chancellor of a gross private Exchequer. He had brains too, and had used to some purpose the keys that public schools and ancient universities leave lying about, in a casual way, before the toddling feet of their nurslings, to pick up or to leave, as they choose. He had travelled, and found out for himself what men have done in the arts, and he had grasped the idea of history. So he had come to see civilisation, the real thing, face to face—not the dead word that we use lifelessly, but the living magnificent figure everlastingly fighting its way through wastes of sand and thorns, with eyes that appealed for help to all the brave and clean-hearted.

Garth had believed, in his youth, that what is called "public life" would give him his best chance of helping. At twenty-six he had gained the liking of the House of Commons, a senate not blind to personal worth, though it may care about other things more. When his party came into power they made him a Civil Lord of the Admiralty; then he had been Under-Secretary for War; now, a few weeks after the death of his wife, the party triumphed again and Garth was called into the Holy of holies, the actual Cabinet. Yet the best tipsters were already ceasing to give him as a predestinate Prime Minister.

He was " unsound," so they would tell you; one couldn't depend on him. He had ambition, they said; but, like Macbeth's, it was not attended by quite the right type of handmaidens. Once he had thrown up his job, and a good one, on some fad that he had about giving fair play to a pack of Dutch louts who had got in our way at the far end of the earth. Another time he had clean lost the day in a debate—lost it off his own bat—by bringing into the light an embarrassing fact which the Opposition, like fools, had never noticed at all. He apparently failed altogether to see the good fight as it was—as a strife between a noble army of patriots and a crew of puny dastards who pestered the patriots at their work. He would speak as if each party, perhaps, had got hold of something to which each of the others might pay too little regard if it had everything its own way. Even the Irish! Even Labour!

This failing had been noticed even before his wife was removed to where crowns of laurel and palm could no longer be laid in her lap. But from that incident onward the dazzling future that men had predicted for Garth certainly wheeled round, faster than ever, towards a position just behind him. His party's press took to writing him off as a fainéant, jibber or crank. Black looks from party leaders were presently followed by frank wiggings, or attempts to wig. " But, damn him," said John Basil, one of these chieftains, " it's no easy job, I can promise you—telling off Garth."

The old diplomatist, Wynnant, to whom it was said, laughed understandingly. " No? You begin to find out how beastly good-looking he is, don't you? "

That really was a part of the trouble. Even in early youth, Garth's face had been of the lean and hardy school of handsomeness; its regularity of structure showed up strongly through its rather close-fitting vesture of flesh. It

was now growing tautly ascetic or Savonarolan. His black hair grew in the thronging, curling and overlapping locks that are common on old statues, but seem now to be rare. Of late this puissant headpiece had put on a chaplet of slight greyness, worn like a wreath tilted a little back on the head. It looked hard-gotten, somehow; so did the multitudinous small lines now congregating round Garth's eyes.

"It isn't only his looks," said Basil. "It's that devastatory simple way that he has of seeing a thing. It's right, and so you must do it—that's all he can see. Isaiah as *enfant terrible*. He'd scuttle whole civilisations, not to say parties. And yet he isn't a prig, confound him! If only he were, you could sneer in his face and begin to feel better. He's utterly humble, inside, although he's a *Dies Iræ* to look at."

"It's a family curse," said Wynnant. "His father, old Auberon Garth, was born a militant monk—Cato, Bayard, Don Quixote, all muddled together—went out to fight with Garibaldi—wasted his money on every mad cause he could find. It was he that stuffed up Tom with this chivalry tosh. And Tom's wife, that has just died, was as bad, although she looked like a Hebe by Titian."

II

Nothing for it, at last, but to jettison this manifest Jonah. The party did the thing in style, being sincerely fond of him, as well as afraid. The lies given out from on high, as to the cause of his resignation, were framed to do him all imaginable honour. The peerage they offered was of a grade higher than his Ministerial rank required. This was safe, for they knew that he was not taking anything of the sort. For the same adequate reason they offered him a large political pension.

Plain hard work was all he wanted now, not lollypops nor money to buy them. One of his notions was that the national ship was carrying too many passengers, too little crew. Now that his own chosen work was taken out of his hands, it was bitter to feel that he had never made the right start; he ought to have first learnt a trade in his youth—the law, commerce, anything—fitted himself into the working life of the country, made himself able to earn, at some job or other, enough wages to keep him; every one, gentle or simple, ought to do that; fail to do that and you had already begun to lose caste; you were not giving your proofs; you were one of the maggots inhabiting Britain's cheese; you were putting a sting of truth, so far as you could, into the Socialist talk about parasites who lived on "the workers." Too late now, perhaps, to walk a hospital or to read for the Bar. Still he could throw up his seat in the House and fall to, for the longest of hours, on some of the least voluptuous forms of public service—the stodgy indispensable humdrum of local government, routine committees, ploddingly useful enquiries too dull for the Press to report.

His former colleagues cast a look his way, now and then, half-amused and half-puzzled. "King Arthur," said Basil, the next time he and Wynnant met, "has got himself up as municipal dustman."

"It's Tom's one wicked pride," Lord Wynnant said, "to be a nobody."

"As if he ever could!" said Basil.

III

Whenever the day's dusty labours ended in time, the widower would speed off home like a carrier-pigeon released: he wanted to reconstruct for the two children whatever fragment he could of their old delight of "coming down to the drawing-room" daily for the last hour before bath and

bed. It was then that their mother had read to them, played games on the floor, or sung nursery rhymes at the big piano, Auberon sitting straight up on her knee, rapt with the divine sounds, and Molly snuggling close on a minute wicker chair.

The failure of this endeavour was almost as flat as that which had crowned the larger politics of the prentice entertainer. Singing or playing upon the piano was out of Garth's power. So he tried reading stories aloud. The children were nice about it; but signs thickened that even the best beloved of fables, when read out by him, were no longer quite the old thing.

By way of amends he tried to strike out a line of his own. Going down on all-fours, he gave representations of lions and tigers, roaring and leaping about among the formalised Persian flora of the drawing-room carpet. This went fairly well for a time, at any rate as a relief for a public jaded with Garth's ineffective rendering of the nursery sagas. Auberon would uplift his voice softly during a pause in the tale about the Glass Hill: "Fahva, when you've finissed zis story, will you, please, be a wild beast?" The story, with less interpretative magic than ever to help it, would lumber on to its next pause. But then, "Oh, Fahva, be a lion to me now," Auberon appealed. Before the story's end it was almost a wail of "Fahva, I'm tired of you not being a beast to me." So the roarings had to begin.

Even these were far from perfect. Their tepid success of esteem could not deceive the mediocre and diffident executant. After a single performance, or, at the best, one half-hearted encore, the audience would fall away, together or apart, to prosecute pursuits of their own devising in some distant corner; they only applied to him for occasional help, congratulation or condolence, according to the fortunes of

these undertakings. Even then, did they really do it through any genuine need of their own? Or just from some instinct of courtesy, lest he feel out of it?

Some things, of course, he could do for them. Auberon, almost breathless with long and hard scribbling on paper, would come across from his chosen studio, the wide window-seat that looked out on the river, bringing his father a pencil to re-sharpen. While this was being done, the child would sit by his side, explaining clearly and kindly, "We have to sharp it, 'oo know, or else no write will come out at the end," and then return to his enchanting labours in the window. That was all right. Auberon really could not put a point to the pencil himself. But what about it, presently, when the artist or author, the blast of his creative inspiration having now blown itself out, came from the window again, his sheet of paper densely overgrown with a thicket of contortionate scrawlings. "See!" he said, with a just pride firmly controlled, as he showed the masterpiece to his father. "See the pwojjuce of my twyings!" First pausing to let the thing tell, he added the natural comment upon an accomplishment so remarkable: "How big Bwon gwowing!" The father gravely admired. But had the boy had need of him, really? Or only befriended him? Taken him, out of charity, into his confidence?

Passing the night-nursery door when the children had just gone to bed that evening, Garth heard himself mentioned within. A hungry heart soon puts away shame: he basely listened. Auberon was saying seriously: "Fahva had a good plan to-day. He made me have my rest in a sunny place, afta my dinner."

"I think all Father's plans are good," Molly replied with the same judicial gravity.

Auberon seemed to need time to ponder this wider statement. Then he said "Vevvy."

Molly, too, took her time, as if working it out, before saying, "I think he has a big plan in his heart and all the little plans come out of it." Thomas Garth marvelled. Strange, the talk of children, still able to use the word "heart" as simply as if it were "tummy." But could it be that the children really thought as well of him as that? Or were they just trying to make the best of the bad job that he was? Nothing more came to show. Molly said, rather maternally, "Last good-night, Bron." Bron said, "Goo'-night. Fun to-morrow"—a forecast with which this resolute optimist always concluded the day.

IV

For several years now to come it was certainly fun on the morrow, for Auberon. All sorts of common things went to his head like strong waters; they filled him with glee, merely because they were just what they were—iron because it was cold to the hand, and wood because it was not, and so on. Finding a hedgehog, a beast new to him, under a shrub, he fairly circled round and round it in ecstasy, glutting himself with the view of the creature from all points of the compass. He could not look away when his father came up: he could only say, out of the depths of his joy, "I am ree-garding it," and then go on circling, ravished above earth, like a little God finding his own creation very good. "How glorious is the cup of my drunkenness!" Auberon did not say it: but that was his state.

What could Thomas Garth have done? Caught the child up in his arms, hugged him, said, "Oh! yes, yes, I understand it all. You've got the secret. That's success in life. Don't let them ever take it away from you." Why, of course Bron would only have stared, wondering what his father meant. If you know nothing but Heaven, how can you even frame the idea of being pushed out of it? No

use: he could not reach the boy; so the bar of reserve went on thickening between them.

V

Now and again it would seem as if signals could pass pretty well between Garth and the children; for some divine minutes their three minds would interplay happily. Riding out before breakfast they met a trailing drift of cattle, twenty head or so. "Oh, Fahva, what sousands of cows!" Bron shouted, with joyous hyperbole.

Molly glanced quickly across at his father. "'Thousands,'" she said, "is just a sort of expression that Bron and I have."

Garth nodded. They presently came to a field more yellow than others. Bron shouted elatedly, "Sousands of buttercups!" Then he checked, pondered a moment, and added, "Real sousands. Not a 'spression." It gave Garth pleasure to see the child feeling its way towards the spare and vivid precision of thoroughbred speech.

In the next meadow four horses were grazing. Garth laughingly challenged the young hyperbolist: "Thousands of horses, Bronkin?"

"Oh, Fahva!" Bron answered, "that isn't even a 'spression. It's just a make-up. Not enough horses to make it a 'spression." The three laughed together: lines of communication were blessedly open.

When thoroughpaced naughtiness came in due time, it seemed to bring the two generations closer than anything else did. Sin, I suppose, is an essentially confidential affair. In the hands of affectionate justice the evil-doer is apt to make the most queerly intimate avowals. One morning Garth came down to discover the breakfast-table in a state of eloquent disarray. Silver and napery were out of their places, Bron red in the face, and Molly in manifest terror

for Bron. But Bron got in his word before Molly had time to practise any diplomacy in his interest; "I only thwew a fish-knife at Molly because it wouldn't hurt so much as an ordina-wy one!"

Onsets with any form of knife were spanking matters, but Bron unwittingly made his spanking lighter than it might have been. When his father had dealt him a not very drastic slap on his extended right palm, some honest or vainglorious strand among the culprit's tangled impulses led him quickly to say, "*That* one didn't hurt." He held out the other hand stoutly. Its portion was light indeed, though heavy enough, I expect, to sting the executioner. For Garth was taken in by none of the common cant about the moral beauty of caning. He knew of nothing else to do, when it came to the worst. But beating the tiny offender who could not hit back, and with whom he wanted to be friends, felt disgustingly like being rude to a servant.

VI

To this shabby indulgence of slanging the domestics Bron was addicted, in seasons of wrath, for some time after Molly had achieved the courtesy proper to their station. When asked by Nurse why he had hidden under a bed at the appointed hour for a walk, the baffled tactician retorted with the furious counter-question: "And why did *you* go scweaming about the house afta me? Making a noise like a person singing for money in the stweets! *You* that are always sending people to Fahva to be scolded, just for your pleasure!"

This unknightly practice so grew upon Bron that for part of his sixth year he fairly wallowed in the hot and turbid waters of invective. His crowning debauch of the sort occurred on a hot August morning. Bron had come in tired, flustered and blowsed with the sun; chagrined, too,

by the miscarriage of one of his vast plans of civil engineering in the gardeners' heap of loose sand. A savage controversial impulse led him on to assume, loudly and insolently, that there would be chicken for dinner. "Chookie, o' course!" he blustered and bluffed as he stumped up the stairs. Alas for our poor human hopes: it was mutton.

Bron broke forth outrageously. "Pig's food again!" he ranted at Nurse; "just what you *would* give us!"

Alone, and with all the sustaining fires of anger now quenched in his blood, Auberon had to repair to the study that evening, when Father came home. Nurse never reported any offence of the children's. Whenever she committed either for trial, the prisoner had to go alone to the great assize in the study and state the case for the prosecution as well as the defence. Bron made his sorry confession with gulps and glowerings of distaste at the scurviest parts of the story. Still, he shirked nothing. Then the man and the boy looked ruefully at each other, linked in a momentary communion of shame and pride. They were intimate for that instant. "Not clever, Bron. Not brave. Not funny," said Thomas, friendly and sorrowful. "Only shabby. Ugly."

A queer thing is the building up of decency; a fine trait may grow like an oak, almost imperceptibly, through many years, or it may come up in the night like a mushroom out on the lawn. Nature is said to do nothing by jumps, but a boy that has had a surfeit of some darling vice may give it up in an hour, utterly and for ever, like some favourite sweet that has upset his stomach. Off came that particular baseness, that night, like a shirt suddenly seen to be lousy. Bron had got the idea—had suddenly discovered, once for all, the beauty of one part of self-mastery.

VII

Still, his father could not pray for the old Adam in Bron to multiply these occasions for mutual understanding. Nor yet could he pick lovers' quarrels with the boy, just for the renewal of love—tempering fires like those in which the two children re-annealed from time to time the good steel of their comradeship. Garth would look on uninterferingly, if he could, while these little furnaces roared. He knew well enough that within the two quarrelling friends there worked forces which knew their business better than he.

Molly, on a low chair, was deep in *Robinson Crusoe*, while Auberon played with his bricks on the drawing-room floor. Wanting an ampler site, to build a palace, he said to Molly, trenchantly, "Take 'oor feet from where zey are in 'oor rashness." Molly, roused so rudely from her delicious pre-occupation with Crusoe's inventory of his household goods, forgot for a moment that she was Bron's mother, and answered firmly, "Imposterous!" Then Bron jumped up and came close to her face and said, in choler, "'Oo're a noosance!" And Molly rebuked him with, "Well, *you* shouldn't blow cool winds on my face with your ragings." Thereupon Bron hallooed, "Molly killing Bron!" and Molly rejoined, "I've quite as lot of right to tread on the floor with my feet as your bricks have!"

Bron now went to war and was beaten condignly, and then Molly put her feet well out of his way. "I'm sorry, Bron," she said; "you can hit me now, as hard as you like—anywhere—all over me."

Bron said, "No. It would be silly."

"Well," said Molly, "I'll give you all my Life Guards."

"'Oo mustn't," Bron replied; "zey were a present."

"Then," Molly said, "I'll lend you *all* my soldiers to

play with, as long as you like, if you won't mind my having beaten you."

Bron bristled up again. "'Oo didn't beat me. I beat 'oo."

Molly took it placably: "Your hands *are* very strong, Bron, 'speshly when the feel of some one's hair between your fingers puts more strengf in them."

Bron subsided, and Molly ended it all with, "You see, when you called me a nuisance, I *may* have been a nuisance to *you*, but I wasn't a nuisance in *my* sight."

Bron pondered, and left it at that. The storm had blown itself out: from mind to mind, perhaps, an idea had passed.

Garth had seen it all through, from afar. He was better out of it, better for them; tempers were furnished, like ropes and ladders in gyms, for each little gymnast to overcome for himself. Besides, if you butted in, to do good, slips were easy to make. They would come, anyhow, before you knew what you were doing. Musing one day in a chair on the lawn, Garth was roused by a touch of Bron's hand at its muddiest, which was muddy indeed. The father had said in an instant, "Bron, do you *like* being so dirty?" And in another the son had answered, with dignity, "No, I don't. But it's me work."

Then it was clear: a miss had been made; a message had not been picked up. Bron had come up with a mighty confidence to impart; he had wanted to offer his father a share in a lofty satisfaction. For the first time the gardener had granted an old prayer of Bron's and given him a piece of "real work" to do. All by himself he had dug a small bed that had really needed digging. It would have been dug by a gardener if no Bron had been there, with his great spade, to do it.

CHAPTER III

I

THE greatest of innovations was started by Bron at the age of seven. First of his generation he climbed the big beech at the far end of the lawn.

It was a doughty climb; for the first twelve feet from the ground there were no branches at all; the trunk was smooth and too vast to embrace and shin up. But the enemy's flank could be turned. The children's swing hung by two chains from a level branch higher up; and Auberon told Molly that night: "I climbed up one of the chains to its top, and then, with great difficillily, I lifted my leg over the branch, and then I climbed up. I found it 'straordinaly safe in the tip-top of the tree, where the magpies live. Safer than on the ground, 'cause you only hold on to the ground by your feet. At the top the wind waves you about and you hear the tree purring. We must cert'nly live in the trees always. I'm conf'dent Fahva won't be dang'rous about it, even if Nurse is."

Nurse might have been. But Bron had scented aright his father's sympathy with the joy of cutting the tether which ties the duller beasts to the flat earth. Garth might be an old Tory, but he was not an old hen, to spare himself tremors by keeping his sturdy brood from adventuring in new elements. Little monkeys ought to be monkeys. So the two found they were free to live the new, the thrilling arboreal life. They found delicious prehensile powers in their hands and feet, and unsuspected skill that came responsively up, ready-made, out of unexplored depths, to meet the needs of this novel existence.

Molly supped the new intoxicant the more soberly of the two. She always had her ward, Bron, to think for. But Bron grinned with ungovernable glee every time his feet

quitted the ground: he drew up his legs to the lowest branch with a triumphant snatch. What harm could any snake in the grass below do to him now? The glee of him quivered and flicked in his naked soles when they fitted themselves clenchingly on to the adorable, graspable roundness of middle-sized boughs. "Isn't it abs'utely tremendrous," he asked Molly with fervour, "the way en'mies can't creep up behind you in a tree?"

II

And yet, I suppose, mankind must always be growing. That very autumn the two were impelled, by Heaven knows what, to get them down from the trees and establish themselves in a hole in the face of a low gravel cliff that impended over the river. Nature had roughed out this cavern; Molly and Bron revised her handiwork, enlarging it into a kind of sand-martin's hole on a grand scale. Thus perfected, it ran some five feet horizontally into the vertical bosom, or riverain frontage, of Middlesex. Then it took a sharp turn to the left. Artificial thenceforth, it persisted for some six feet more. Its end was out of sight of the world, and the darkness of this ultimate refuge, even at noonday, elated Bron till no utterance except incoherent song was possible for him.

Peace passing all understanding enveloped the two pioneers when they sat supreme at the mouth of this cave on their return from some distant and momentous expedition. No fearsome beast had turned up in their absence and settled himself in at the far end of the cave; their land reposed; they could rest and thank the stars that had sent them a governess for lesson-times only and not, like Claude Barbason's, a directress of their leisure and organiser of approved outdoor occupations.

As that winter closed down and darkness came on before tea-time, the two would light a small fire of sticks in the

mouth of the cave and sit on the safe side, the cave side, of the blaze, broody with silent contentment, peering through their turbid stockade of smoke and flickering flame at the shifting glooms and gleamings along the nondescript foreshore beyond, at the whispering river and Gistleham Ait, the savage island of osiers and rank grasses in mid-stream, untrodden as yet by foot of Molly or Bron. From that island jungle, with only a reasonable amount of assistance from imagination, a lion or leopard, extremely famished, but awed and perplexed by the glow of the fire, might readily be discerned peering back at the two settlers' illuminated faces.

With this stronghold always there to fall back on, they practised the arts of the hunter and of the hunted, stealing up like stalking cats upon the herons in Gistleham Reach, to watch them fishing in the shallows; plunging their bared arms swiftly down at eels seen lying lazily at the river's bottom; or else effacing themselves, with held breath and tumultuous pulse, among dry reeds or whatever garden rubbish was most like their clothes, when the abhorred time came for going in for the night, and Nurse once more became "dangerous."

"Isn't it *delicous*," Bron would say to Molly, using an emphasis that cannot be rendered by any resources of print, "when you are hiding behind a tree that's really too little to hide you prop'ly? Not moving at all, but just having a struggle to make your body be littler! Tremendrous!"

III

The vogue of the cavern lasted till Bron's eighth birthday, a festival hailed, at its dawn, with the ecstatic cry, "It *is* to-day"—shouted through the open door to Molly's room—and bidden farewell to, next morning, with the reflection, also uttered privately to Molly, "Well, anyhow, I *am* eight still." Almost from that day, strange to say, the cavern

seemed to irk the maturing Bron. New desires possessed him in his riper age. Away with all slavish home-keeping! Out into the great world! The nobleness of life was to cross the unfathomed backwater that hitherto had cut them off from the pathless thickets of Gistleham Ait, affront the unknown fauna of the island and pluck out the heart of its marshy mystery.

"It's dang'rous," Bron argued gravely to Molly, "still we *have* to do it—else nothing will ever be any good, any more."

Molly gave in, though uneasy about Auberon's imperfect swimming. Choosing the after-dinner hour when Nurse, by Heaven's kindly connivance, used to "drop off" under the beech-tree, they swiftly stripped among the rhododendrons nearest the shore and struck out lustily for the New World.

They swam, for security's sake, in close formation. Molly, the stronger vessel, had stipulated for this; Bron was to swim on the upstream side of her, with his left hand on her right shoulder. So the sturdy Molly was the main propulsive force of the whole equipage; but the lesser legs of Bron and his disengaged right arm provided auxiliary screws of no mean value, as Molly eagerly assured their proprietor, while she insisted, nevertheless, upon her precautions.

The nervously short strokes of the pair, rapid as those of scared frogs, can scarcely have had to be plied for two minutes before the naked explorers were plunging on feet and hands up the mud banks of the enchanted island, to hide and recover breath among its serried osiers.

"We're form'able swimmers!" Bron panted elatedly, when they could settle down for a moment, under cover. "Well done us. Bags this island private to us."

"Watch where the sun is," Molly anxiously urged. Steering by the glorious lamp of Heaven they committed

themselves to the trackless forest of withies, forced a way across the new continent's sixty good yards of breadth and beheld in amaze the main stream beyond, with its unfamiliar system of forelands, eddies and bays, all freakish and delectable.

"Tremendrous! Delicous!" Bron stood doating on it all, till Molly espied some one fishing far off in a punt, and then they knew they were naked and plunged back into the scrub. But the earth was theirs, and the fulness thereof.

IV

Three months later the water turned achingly cold; the rough island story grew rougher; the numbed hearts of the furtive swimmers cried out for a boat. Father's boat and punt were locked up in the boat-house, pending the children's passing of a stiff swimming test. Clearly they had to found a marine of their own, unobserved.

First a plank was privily requisitioned and launched, for ferry service. But this rude craft was found to exhibit the unforeseen and quite incorrigible vice of taking a heavy list to one side or one end, without provocation or warning, and tilting the ship's company into the Thames.

Only then did they respectfully take into council Bert, the new garden boy, a genius "tremendrously good," as Bron had already noticed, at making all sorts of things. With Bert as principal naval designer, they painfully stretched a skin of old canvas tight over a sketchy framework of wood and nailed the edges of the canvas down upon the gunwale with tin tacks, to form a gaunt coracle, a thing of sunken cheeks and prominent ribs.

This Genius of Famine, expressed in terms of naval architecture, they then tarred to repletion. Bert, the all-foreseeing, contrived the tar. The thing floated, only too well. Fantastically buoyant, she almost refused to displace

any water at all. She whirled round on her base at the touch of light airs, like a leaf that has fallen dry on a lake. But she served. She changed the world. The charm of a strange new accessibility suddenly invested the farther bank of the main stream. It was " tremendrous."

V

Of course Thomas Garth had seen much of this and inferred all the rest. He had tried, unobserved, to cut down the risks of the game as much as he could without depriving the two of the training of free adventure, from which you can never keep risk wholly out. He coveted for them the joy and the education of winning at least the physical world for themselves.

They won it, triumphantly. First they won the world as it stood, with no history to it—just the feel of the earth as it was to the senses now—what it would be if it had all been made only last night and were not a worn ancient face, seamed, stained and engraved with endless cross-hatching of documentary wrinkles, its mountains the ruins of more wondrous heights now all but erased, our life upon it, perhaps, by this time the unconsciously subsident life of an over-blown rose. Whatever the date, wherever they were, Molly and Bron stood, as yet, at the centre and lived in the prime. Everything, just as they saw it, was all that it could be thought of as being; every tree was of its only conceivable age and size; any break in the line of camp-shedding along the flank of the Ait was normal, not a falling-away from some higher state that should be. Petty kinks in the line of the foreshore, silted shoals at the tail of the Ait or at some ditch's toy estuary, eddies stealing back upstream in angles between the bank and the little sharp currents thrown off obliquely from tiny headlands—all these were not relics of any old doings of water and land; nothing of any sort

was mere postscript, nor yet preface; neither did they lead up to any greater condition of things nor were they lapses from one; they had the unqualified worth of a first Creation of all. The two saw all there was and, behold! it was very good—almost as if they had made it.

VI

But history comes. You may start without any, so far as you know; but all the rest of the time you are touching or making it. Eve ate an apple, and see all that happened.

The children had not been navigators for more than a year before historic events that stood out enormous in the life of Gistleham Reach were commemorated in names not known to Ordnance surveyors: Massacre Bight, where, after age-long vigils, the two had seen the fledgeling cuckoo eject the lawful heirs of the mansion; Floaty Head, the insignificant cape of sand where Auberon first detected, and showed to Molly, the sun-dried granules of flint floating off on a rising tide, though the world said that stones did not float; Misery Spit, where that first-built and best-loved of canoes rammed itself, during the hottest of Augusts, upon a truly venomous snag—a spiky stake, almost as hard and unwoodlike as iron, that stuck up a few inches slantwise out of the bed of the shrunken stream.

While the crew had waded ruefully around the wreck, essaying salvage, Bron's naked feet, plunging distractedly hither and thither, had struck one stumpy tooth of the same kind after another. In talk with his father at breakfast next day these perils to shipping were touched upon with some bitterness. "Father," Bron said gravely, "the river has got a sort of sharp nails sticking up through its soles, to hurt people and boats." He went on to describe these enormities more precisely.

Thomas Garth, as you know, was eccentric. "The old

boy," Colin would say, "is a graveyard that won't do its work. The greatest school and the greatest university in the world tried to give a good classical education a decent burial in him, as well as in me and you. But in Garth the thing won't lie quiet and moulder. It gets up and 'walks'; it comes poking into the real, serious affairs of the day."

Learned writers of the kind who sit in chairs, weighing documentary proofs, and don't go out and look at the things and places that they write of, had lately been saying more positively than ever that Cæsar and his troops must certainly have waded across the respectable arm of the sea now constricted between the Palace of Westminster and St. Thomas's Hospital—then flanked by handsome fringes of marsh on each side—on their way north to St. Albans. But Garth had known, all his life, as well as he knew his own flower-garden, the great ford of Thames, a mile down Gistleham Reach. There he had seen little launches run aground in the fairway, at summer low water, and children standing knee-deep in mid-stream. In league with his latest informant, Bron, he now set forces in motion which ended by drawing out of the gravel under the muddy bed of the stream some hundreds of semi-petrified oak stakes, planted in rows and all leaning the same way as that which had bruised Bron in the heel. Then a few learned men began to remind the rest that the Venerable Bede had noticed the same thing as Bron, only twelve centuries sooner; were not these hundreds of stakes a few of the thousands the British Cassivelaunus had driven well in, to engage the bowels of the Roman troops as they forded the river breast-high?

Molly and Auberon had not heard about Cæsar before. He seemed to be a great fellow. So Bron got quite the wrong introduction to him and his men—not as nominatives and accusatives and other instructive occasions for parsing, but

as the drenched waders now described by his father as sweating and spitting and cursing the beastly stakes that caught them so nastily in the tummy. Bron listened entranced while he heard, in his father's words, which tingled with life, the hook-nosed captain's tale of his brush with the Britons at the ford. Bron wriggled and crowed with excitement. Think of the horses splashing and stumbling across, the men on foot panting up the steep bank, dripping wet; and then the Britons above, turning tail of a sudden—changed from a defiant, yelling front into scampering figures huge and clear on the sky-line!

The vision gave Bron strange new pleasures. School was all to come yet. No one had put it into his head that there was anything rotten or mean in liking to know about Romans and poor, funny old Britons.

VII

When they were veterans of twelve and nine, Molly and Bron looked back with a kind of pity on that benighted state of themselves in which they did not yet know Victor Nevin. Strange to think that even in those old days the brilliant Victor had already been going about the world, shining, and they utterly unaware of it.

One or two other friends of about their own age had already dazzled the humble eyes of the pair before Victor the Conqueror first hove in sight, for tea on Molly's ninth birthday. Colin March was always "tremendrously funny": Claude Barbason, when not hoarding toys in grim silence, had a way with him that made you feel how little you knew the great world. But Victor was the nonpareil; Victor was imperturbable, the comely, the witty and wise, the serenely smiling dominator of people and of circumstances. Bron had fairly sat gaping with admiration during that eye-opening tea. "How *can* a person eat his tea and not listen to

Victor's compersations?" he had indignantly asked when rebuked by Nurse for not getting on with his food.

"Listening to Victor's compersations" had, from that time forth, been one of the headiest of lawful pleasures. Molly's riper mind could, of course, enjoy even more than Bron's of the flavour of Victor's ironic and allusive wit. Victor was godlike, and to confess and worship him was the only thing to be done—at any rate for a soul so downright as Molly. She did it freely the second time he came to the house. Victor and she had been washing their hands in the bath-room basin at the same time, and Victor was nattily pushing down the skin at the roots of his oval and roseate finger-nails.

"You're nice," Molly began.

Victor did not contest it.

"Your green tie is nice," the adorer resumed.

"So glad you like it," said Victor.

A short pause and then Molly said firmly, "I'm perfec'ly sure that you can bath yourself all right." And then, "When you fall down I 'spec' you never cry. You just say 'Oh!'" and then again, "Even if a wild beast were to eat you, you wouldn't cry. You'd only grumble." This litany of Molly's was not ill received by the divine addressee.

Then and ever since, five minutes of Victor had always sufficed to reduce our two homespun wits to a state of almost kneeling admiration. And now their seasoned judgments confirmed their earlier impressions.

Sometimes Victor would come for a whole day. Then he would review the Chantry composedly, say that the house was a little too much out of the world, and practise critical charity towards the garden and everything that was in it. "I thought that I would see," he said at tea-time on one of these days, "how much your two garden-boys knew. So

when I saw them helping the man to plant some elders to-day I said, 'After you've planted these elders, will you be planting any youngers?' Fred saw the joke pretty soon, but we had to explain it to Bert."

Bron and Molly roared: their laughter would come as pat as any chorus to Victor's sallies. For reasons which they could not, for the life of them, have given, they would not themselves have played off this jest upon Bert, even if they had had the requisite genius. Still, it must be all right: Victor had done it.

"Putrid name—'Bert,' really," Victor resumed. Just by the way he pronounced a name, Victor could put a kind of inverted commas round it, and these were extraordinarily damaging; you felt you must have been a dullard not to have thought it a measly name long ago.

The face of Bron fell. A blight, a killing blight, had fallen on the name of the valued co-author of the first canoe. Victor's alert feelers warned him, no doubt, for he sheered off a little, without abruptness. "Talking of names," he said, "do you know what's a common name in Scotland?"

"No. What?" they both eagerly asked.

"Thistle," said Victor.

Bron gaped. "For persons?" he asked in amazement.

"No. For plants," Victor said, with a slight, curly smile on his Cupid's-bow lips. None of your blatant triumphs for Victor.

The two listeners marvelled. The ease of it all. The ingenuity!

"I do believe," said Bron that night to Molly, after Lights Out, "that Victor *always* has an underneath meaning to his talk!"

"Yes. And isn't it wonderful," Molly added, "the way

he sits there in his chair, putting his little smile on all the day-nursery? "

"Tremendrous!" Bron agreed. "And then his describation of the tipsy man! Wasn't it inciting?" Bron's English, when he was deeply stirred, was apt to become rashly experimental.

VIII

More fatally rash were Bron's few and short surrenders to a certain mad impulse that sometimes arose in him. What if he, Bron, should come out strong, like Victor?—shine in conversation and have people admire him? Pricked by this transient spur of ambition he ventured at long intervals to launch some topic of his own, drawn from his special interests in the make of birds or of ships. "Victor," he asked, with a strained composure, when one of these wild fits possessed him, "where, do you think, are the works of a ship?"

"Well, and where, O most wise Bron?" Victor replied, with a curiosity merely polite and, indeed, slightly ironic. The Nevins were all eminent Latins and Grecians. Quite young they learnt to contemn all physical science as "Stinks." And was not marine engineering a subdivision of Stinks?

"In its bo-els," said Bron firmly, controlling his pride as he spoke. "Under its crop. Truly."

Victor winced expressively. "Truly? Truly a disgusting truth!" he observed.

Bron's topic instantly wilted. Victor's ban had a wondrous power of bringing home to you the conviction of sin, especially the sin of grossness. And in that sin I fear that Bron almost revelled. When it came to the pleasures of the table, and to its pains, he was Rabelaisian. "O Father! Sir! Good man!" he would cry, at the mid-day meal, when liberally helped to something toothsome. A tough piece of meat would move him to say darkly, "This gristle

is all full of springs. When I bite it, it jumps bigger under my teeth," and the first curds and whey of a year drew from him the rhapsody, "It brings forth the Spring on my brow!" But it was at seasons of festal repletion that Bron sank lowest. He came back from a birthday tea at Claude Barbason's house to find Molly and Victor in the Chantry garden. Bron described the feast, its glories and the attendant sorrows. Everything at the Barbasons' was always magnificent. "At tea," he averred, "there was nothing plain whatever. The lowest thing was some splendid sandwiches. The only thing that I don't like is that all the inner parts of my stummick are sore."

Victor smiled across to Molly—a confidential smile that seemed to offer her the privilege of sharing his amusement at the sight of this poor Goth.

"It's like a kitty growling," the unperceiving Bron went on, with his round, red, ingenuous face full of care.

"What is?" Molly asked, in discomfort.

"Some sort of grumpy music going on inside me," said the shameless one.

Victor's laugh at this was addressed wholly to Molly. It co-opted her, still more distinctly, into the civilised set, the elect, the non-hogs.

"I wonder," Bron said, as he scratched a head heavy from the banquet, "why it is that niceness in your mouth should not be good for the inside vitals of your body."

"Oh, don't scratch your head so," Molly whispered in distress.

"I *have* to scratch it," the spent reveller pleaded aloud. "It's all bizzing with tickles."

"Bron," said Molly, that night, from bed to bed, through the half-open door, "I'm making myself a sort of promise not to remark about eatables, ever again."

"Scand'lus!" said Bron. "How can any one not talk

about prog when they've had a progandous day, as I have to-day? And then a sincere pain in their body!"

"I do believe," Molly urged, "we've always talked too much about our tummy pains. I've done it much more than you—much more than nice people do. They might think us nasty."

"A habit," Bron said, doggedly, "that's once d'veloped can't be un'veloped."

"Do let's try," Molly pleaded. "Goo' night!"

"Goo' night."

No doubt Molly saw, well enough, that he was going to try. A little grumbling from Bron, in such cases, was only like the scraping and plunging of a horse trying to get a heavy load under way.

"Goo' night, again," Molly said gratefully. "Last glowing goo' night."

"Goo' night," said Bron. "Fun to-morrow."

IX

Victor came of a caste less antique than the Garths, but still choice in its way. The Nevins were academic, but socially they were elect; children of light, they could hold their own with any child of this world. For a hundred years their clan had drawn from "the things of the mind" —a phrase which they used a good deal—a full stock of the good things of this life. Nevins grew up, with the unflustered ease of geranium cuttings reared under glass, into bishops, deans, head-masters, heads of houses at Oxford and Cambridge. They scarcely seemed to compete or to strive. A Nevin was deferentially served with bays, a laurel wreath, or a choice palm, and then the other aspirants scrambled among themselves for any honorific green-stuff that might be left over. Like great princes of the Church in an earlier age the Nevins had gained the ear of the world's

rulers and yet retained the distinction of being vessels of grace; they acted as standing counsel for culture and conservators of serious critical standards.

"And what is all the merriment about?" Victor asked, looking in at the door of the bath-room. Molly, nail-brush in hand, was helping Bron to dig out dark earth from his nails, before the nursery dinner.

Molly's careless laughter ceased. "Only a little make-up of ours," she said, deprecatingly. Molly walked in the fear as well as the love of the god-like curator of civilisation.

Bron was less wary. "About a very poetical man," he said, "who worked in a garden. We made up a poem:

> "His talk was all rhyme,
> His nails were all grime."

Bron roared again at the funniness of this composition. Victor didn't laugh. "If I may break it to you," he said, with Olympian aplomb; "that isn't a poem. It's only a dogger'l."

Even Bron was stricken sober. But yet more reprehensible than his æsthetic blindness was his turn for subversive speculation. "Isn't it curious," he pondered aloud as the three children lay on the hot August lawn and blinked at the dazzling river, "how people say a dull book is dry, but they don't say a nice book is wet. Why shouldn't you say 'a perfectly sopping animal story'?"

"'A dry book,'" said Victor judicially, "is an idiom."

That ended that. Bron's craze for going behind things which need only be looked at in front was checked, for the time. The three lay silent, blinking and thinking. Then Bron suddenly asked: "Victor, what is a glory?"

Victor counter-questioned "Why?"

"Because I've heard God has a thing he's fond of, called his glory."

"It's all in the Bible, all right," said Victor dismissively.

This time, however, Bron was having it out. "And why," he went on, "do they say he'll come to try us all for doing sins when they say he's here now—everywhere, all the time? He must be just on top of my head now."

"My good vain youth——" Victor began.

But Bron was for making the most of his outing, before the prison-house of shyness and humility should close on him again. "If he's everywhere," he persisted, "he must be there as much as anywhere else. So why has he got to come? And sometimes they say he'll come with a noise, and sometimes they say we won't hear him because he'll come with little quiet feet, like a fly's pats or a kitty's, and turn people upside down who do sins."

"My dear asinine goose," said Victor, quite disturbed by these wanderings away from respectable tracks, "all that's after you're dead."

But Bron plunged on. "I don't believe," he said, "you're ever *quite* dead. I'm pos'tive that if I were put in a grave I could just reach up with my arm through the earth, slowly, moving it by little bits and scratching letters on the ground on top, for people to see. How do we know that the kitty we buried won't move just a tiny bit?"

"O, let's dress up and do acting," said Victor.

"Yes, yes," Molly cried. It was dreadful to have poor old Bron seeming silly to Victor, and Victor snubbing Bron. And Victor was sure to be jolly if they acted, he did it so marvellously well.

Victor was author, producer and actor in one, like Molière; the way he could make up speeches amazed the two others. Molly received a few goodish parts at his hands: the heroine has to be somebody. But Bron got mainly the scurvy tasks that are apt to fall to the minor "utility" actor under the actor-manager system. And,

now, after doing patiently the Recreant Knight, the Furtive Assassin, the Hard Father and the Peasant Slave, Bron jibbed when he was directed to stab himself and fall dead across the mail-clad body of Victor, as became the Faithful Page. "No," he demurred. "It's too silly."

"My good lad," said Victor, "you don't really expect to be the Knight Templar? At your age!"

The conscious moderation of Victor's tone put Bron hopelessly in the wrong. He weakened. "I don't mind," he said, "saying, 'Don't insult valour in the form of this fallen knight!' But I have a strong obnoxion to stabbing myself. It's silly."

"Well, well——" Victor said resignedly. Human perversity had to be humoured, no doubt. Bron was let off the supreme sacrifice. But a passing demur, like this, never meant that he questioned Victor's genius for the drama. His admiration was much too profound to be uttered to Victor himself. But Molly heard about it and echoed it. Bed talked to bed in the dark. "Vick is most terrific'ly good," Bron said on the night after the first performance of that rattling farce, "The Medical Man." "He sticks the key into your mouth in 'zac'ly the proper place for a theromometer. I know, 'cause I've had my real tempiture taken by Dr. Wynne. Simply tremendrous, Vick's goodness at acting!"

"*Isn't* he wonderful," Molly said with intensity. "Goo' night, Bron."

"Goo' night. Fun to-morrow."

X

In his tenderest years Auberon had picked up a dangerous habit: he took it that people meant all they said—if not that they meant even more. This came of living too much with his father. When Thomas Garth said he "hoped"

to take Molly and Bron out for a ride or a row or a swim the next day, Bron knew that this benefit was a pretty sure thing.

Of course he knew, all right, what lying was. He had tried it. Long ago he had found that a lie could often get him a thing that he wished for. So he had told lies. Their power seemed magical. Things that he feared to meet could be charmed out of his path with a simple lie. Then he was found out and there came a good, long, friendly talk with his father.

He now learnt that his father had made precisely the same find as himself: it seemed his father knew, as well as Bron, what an Aladdin's slave-of-the-lamp this lying could be—a getter of gains and a saviour from things that hurt or scared or gave you trouble. And yet his father felt that to call up this slave was "pretty mean," however grievous your need.

His father did not exactly say why: he did not put it in so many words that all the virtues worth having were various forms of courage and all the vices were various modes of turning tail and showing white feathers. And yet that notion did pass from the man to the child. Words in themselves, I suppose, are naught and the best of phrases only groups of clickings of teeth and pursings and partings of lips upon jets of soiled air. The little or much that they mean depends on what you feel the creature to be who is making these signals at the time. When Thomas Garth said he thought lies pretty mean, Bron felt he was being let into one of the magnificent secrets of the grown-up; instantly and for ever it became one of the bottom certainties of life that lies were a sort of sneak filth which nobody would touch, once he knew what it was. All grown-up people were brave and said only just what they meant.

With this precarious faith still unquenched, Bron entered

a church, at the age of ten, for the first time since his christening. Why not sooner? Because his father had religion alive and aflame in himself and did not want his son to be rendered incapable of winning that treasure. So he had not let the child be drilled from the first to repeat things which, if they are uttered at all, ought to rise to the lips like insuppressible cries of love or grief. Bron, as you know, had heard some random talk about God. But he had not heard the full story of Christ nor seen a congregation of people saying they were miserable and wicked when they were clearly on very good terms with themselves and the world, well pleased with their clothes, and standing up without fear for human or divine inspection. This lack of proper experience led to a sad upset the first time that Bron, under the escort of Nurse, was immersed in the flood of astonishing and touching assertion that is let loose in places of worship about eleven on Sunday mornings.

The outside of Gistleham parish church had always looked quiet and safe. A goodly piece of Tudor brick, with some small second-hand Roman bricks thrown in to save money, it sat serene on its banked plinth of earth, secure above more literal floods and spring tides. For Bron's ears its uncommonly good peal of bells, doubly charged with melody by the liquid sounding-board lying below, had always shaken out the very soul of mellow romance upon the listening night when the ringers practised on Wednesday evenings. Bron had often lain awake late, squirming for joy, as he sucked in this enchanting melody.

Uncle Quentin, too, the aged holder of this cure of souls, had always before been one of the least disturbing of men. But now—! First there was some lovely singing and reading. Uncle Quentin betrayed no agitation during this part. But then he climbed the pulpit stairs and gave out a piece of

terrible news—no doubt, Bron felt, because so many people were all there together and might help at once. It was a rending tale of some kind and brave man ferociously hurt a long time ago, and feeling a dreadful pain, even now, because there was something not done which he wanted them all to do for him.

Old Quentin Garth certainly knew how to preach. Bron wept beside Nurse in the family pew, shrinking shamefacedly back into his corner. But people seemed to be strangely tranquil. Instead of rushing out to help they sang another hymn, quite slowly. Even when they came out of church they walked away as if nothing remarkable had happened and nothing had to be done. And Nurse, when anxiously questioned, only said we mustn't take things too much to heart—people would think us so odd if we did. Strange! Why, Uncle Quentin had just said: "We must take to heart all that Jesus has borne for us."

Molly was down with measles, and not to be seen. Bron, alone in his distress, almost tackled his father. If only he had done it, this might have changed many things that came to pass later on. But Bron's first hesitant word of approach to the avowal was, somehow, not caught: his father may have been thinking of something else; and so Bron lost heart and gave up, as will happen between fathers and sons; the ships draw near in the dark till a shout would carry across the little interval that is left; but some one is not on the watch; nothing passes across; and then the two vessels sheer off again to estranging distances.

Beaten there, Bron felt he must now wait till Monday, agonising as it was. Bert, the leal Bert, the sensible and friendly Bert, would then be back at work in the garden. Bert would help. But Bron had learnt a little caution already. It seemed curiously easy to get oneself thought silly. So it was with a cunning show of idle inquisitiveness

that he asked Bert, before breakfast on Monday, "what all the talk was about—what people were saying—about Jesus Christ."

Bert's introduction to Christian history had not been put off so long as Bron's. Bert had long been a patient frequenter of Uncle Quentin's Sunday-school. On hearing Christ's name he went off like a musical-box: "'ceived by th' Oly Ghos', born a Virgimary, suffed undepontius Pilate, 'scruc'fied 'ead a-buried, sended into Hell, Thursday rose again, sended into Heaven, sense a shall come a-judge quick-a-dead——" Bert broke off after delivering this passage gravely, like an incantation. "Don't ya know it?" he said, rather shocked. Bert told Bron, straight off the reel, any number of things about Christ—parables, miracles, snubbings of Jews—things that Thomas Garth had saved up for Bron till he could have some chance of hearing them with understanding. Still, it was clear that no idea of Christ's fate, as an occurrence actual and dreadful, as if some one were drowning in the river or being dragged by a bolting pony, had ever visited Bert.

XI

Auberon was to go to the Nevins' next day: not to tea, for the measles barred that, but just to play with Victor in the garden. Vick—why, of course—Vick was the man to consult in this strait. Vick knew everything.

Snow lay on the ground, and the two were having fun with a sledge when Auberon broached the great topic. Victor winced. His precocious sense of a good theme to keep off was worthy of an archbishop. Still, he kept up very well the light, cheery tone of the elder, the man who knows better. "Compose yourself, my Auberon," he said, "and let bygones be bygones."

Auberon only rushed on, all the harder. Victor tried to

head him off with a quotation adapted, in Victor's scholarly way—he was thirteen now—from the poets :

"Aub'ron, wait a little longer
Till your little wits are stronger."

Growing slightly graver as his junior persisted in indiscretion, Victor fished out a thing that he had heard his father, the great Dr. Nevin, quote with relish from *The Imitation*—something like "What's the good of asking a lot of tough questions, when God won't ever blame you for not knowing?" Good doctrine, too, for the Nevins of this world to bring up when its *enfants terribles*, its devastatory probers of questions that are better left untouched, begin their comfort-killing pranks. But Auberon seemed to find this good diet about as satisfying as sawdust.

Only one thing was left for a prudent physician of souls to prescribe. The sledge had lain unused while they talked. Auberon, Victor said, must be frozen with standing about, talking. Let him fall to; let him pull the sledge with a will. Victor, whose fur gloves were immense, would willingly sit on the sledge and play driver.

Auberon gave way and hauled. Victor adjured him to go faster and faster. "Work jolly hard, Bron," he said. "It makes you broiling. I've often tried it."

Bron, being sturdy as well as desperate, tugged mightily. Quite a good medicine, too, though Victor may not have known much about it. So long as twin-brother body is well clenched for work, like a fist, twin-brother mind may be able to keep care away.

XII

Uncle Quentin preached again the next Sunday. Good stuff too, Auberon thought. It told you what to do. "Be Christlike, one to another." Were we not—so Uncle

Quentin asked his hearers—all castaways on the earth?—a mere boatful of sailors marooned in mid-ocean, on some desolate speck of bare island? Let us be loyal comrades. No shirking of our bit of work! No grabbing at more than our share of whatever small good things were going!

Under the spell of this second masterpiece Auberon made a clean breast, to Bert, of his alarm lest Christ should happen to look that way—that afternoon perhaps—and say in a regretful voice that Auberon was using too much of the castaways' stock of fuel on these cold wet days, or eating more than his ration of shellfish and clams, or whatever castaways in Gistleham ate in their stead. To make things more fit for divine inspection, Auberon pressed upon Bert a kind of covenant of early Christian communism, at any rate in the important matter of sweets—all goodies received thenceforward by either Christian to be pooled and fairly halved for consumption. Bert agreed. He liked Auberon and he venerated the family. Still, he marvelled. The Christian lymph had never "taken" like this in the calm soul of Bert, though Bert was a good fellow too.

Molly, when she could be talked to, came nearer to understanding it all. Molly was always decent about Bron's little rushes this way and that. She accompanied him on his sallies as some mothers ride in the train of adventurous sons, half amused at the crude ardours of men while wholly bent on taking care of their own particular paladins. Quite motherish was Molly's steady sense of the paramount worth of unfevered well-being in body and soul; she was all for preserving alive creatures who, only a short time ago, were invaluable curvilinear babies, especially Bron. So Molly indicated to Bron all the nice sensible people—Nurse, Bert, Victor, Colin, Claude, Uncle Quentin himself on all week-days—whom the New Testament was not visibly upsetting.

There she touched Bron's yielding side. Every one

seemed to know so much better than he! They all had fine, clear, sweeping things to say, right off, while he was fumbling for words to explain how puzzled he was. Surely they must be right. So, by degrees, the restive part of him allowed itself to be patted and stroked down into a pretty safe state of conformity. Even before he went away to be squashed by the best of prep-schools, of public schools and universities into the standard mould of his class, any wild and strong notions he had of his own were learning to lurk in quiet corners of his mind, well out of people's way. Like the Red Indian braves they were being disarmed and committed to remote reservations. To all appearance Auberon, at eleven, was, for his size, a Christian as little perturbed by the volcanic part of Christianity as any whose spirit dozed luxuriously in the warm sunshine of augustly lustrous words and music under the mellow Old-Masterish windows of Gistleham Church.

XIII

Molly, now fourteen, was to go North, to one of the great modern public schools for girls, in the same term that Auberon went South, to Brereton's highly reputed prep-school on the Channel coast.

For both of them the event was too enormous, too epoch-ending and too devastating to be faced in any spirit but that of callous jocosity. Both were afraid, perhaps, of being unbearably moved. Bron went a day before Molly. He started just after their middle-day dinner. It is the least emotional hour of the day; your blood, I suppose, is busy attending to some vital affairs of the intestines; it cannot be bothered to bring up fuel to stoke fires of love and grief in the brain. All day, as the bad hour came nearer, time had seemed to Bron to slide away ungraspably; it felt like sculling up stream in a flood, when the water slips away from your sculls; they can't grip it.

All the morning the two talked trivial rubbish at intervals —irrelevant rubbish, exchanged almost harshly. In anxious haste they put out every kind light that the trouble lit in their eyes. Garth wondered at them during the last meal; could they be shallow-hearted, these little beloved beings, from whom he was cut off? Or were they really strong? He did not know how stern he looked himself at that day's winding-up of the long failure of his own baffled affection. So, at this meal where love was, there was nothing of love's forthright warmth. Each enisled in his separate pain, each aching with tenderness for the two others, they ate together in grim silence the last of those middle-day dinners of childhood which all of them could dimly see now to have been of the nature of sacraments, mystical and enchanting in retrospect, and irrecoverable now.

"Good-bye. We part in peace" was the nearest that Bron came to an utterance worthy of the moment: this in the hall, before he finally went out. His father had already taken his seat in the carriage, to give them their chance.

"Good-bye, old Bron," said Molly. Then she was convulsed and retreated abruptly into the depths of the house. The captaincy of her soul was only regained just in time for her to rush out again to the door and wave both arms to the carriage, now moving. Bron stuck out his head. "Goo' bye again, Molly!" he shouted. "Last glowing goo' bye!" At the word "glowing" his voice hung uncertain between seemly mockery of emotion and shameless abandonment to it. With this tremulous joke, they wrote in the full stop at the end of their last chapter of childhood.

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER IV

I

WITH no easy mind had Thomas Garth let Molly and Auberon go. But what else could he do? A sailor must live the life of his ship; men and women must live the life of their own country. Private tuition was the mere outer shell of an education: it left nearly everything out; and none of the fancy new educations had yet given its proofs. So the old public school, whatever its faults and absurdities, had to be used, for what it was worth. But still Garth was uneasy.

The English world that he loved, and believed in, seemed now to be failing, and failing first at the top. The common people, he fancied, were still undecayed; his garden was kept and Gistleham ferry was rowed by men of the straight, stable, diligent, good-natured breed of Old Adam and Bottom, of Court and Williams and Bates. But those who had once been its guides—? The old riders seemed to be falling out with their horses—fearing them, not going near them if they could help it, shirking the old job of understanding their wants and sharing their slow, friendly thoughts. As Garth saw things, the only right of captaincy that the old ruling class had ever possessed was drawn from the strength of its members' love and knowledge of tenants, labourers, servants, private soldiers and sailors, their own lifelong comrades in rural economy, in sport, in the rearing of children and in the chivalries of war and adventure.

Not that Garth despised our new rulers, the men of directors' fees and dividends. He admired some of their qualities. Only he hated the way that most of them seemed to think of the "lower orders" as so many wolves to be tricked or dazzled or scared into harmlessness. Almost

everywhere, among the well-to-do, he found a standing assumption that things had finally gone wrong, that the great days were over, the Goths at the gate, the end already in sight; that nothing was left but to see that you and your set did not "get left" while Old England broke up. "Eat and drink, for to-morrow we die"—it was not said, but that was the spirit; it broke out in a new type of flaunting bravado of luxury, as public as possible, flouting the eyes and the ears of the mob. That way lay war between classes, the last abomination of all, the utter failure of England's family. The fatted caterpillars of the commonwealth were gambling with what was not theirs. A demagogue of talent had only to come to the front—he would easily drum forth a host of the hungry and cold to make an end of these maggots and of the cheese that they infested.

Garth hated the thought. Better be dead than see the magnanimous, tolerant England split into two squalid hosts of backbiters, and all the saving talents of Englishmen thrown out of use—the sane earthen humour, the plodding mother-wit that always arrived in the end, the gruff old good-temper in keeping discipline and in enduring it—all the traits that had saved England so many times, when leaders had faltered or luck failed.

What were her old leaders doing to save her from that sorry fate? Many deserting—streaming across from the old thoroughbred camp to make any terms that they could with the queer no-nation Midases that were coming to town in those years from South Africa, jingling in their pockets the profits of the agony and bloody sweat of better men. Garth was a visualiser; the latest change in the state of England presented itself to his mind in the visible figure of a great lady, serene and regal to look at, posting off in a hansom into the City after a hurried breakfast, to cadge from an unsightly company-rigger, her guest of last night, the latest

tip for a flutter in diamonds or gold, rubber or cycles or oil, or whatever dirty gamble was " booming " at the moment.

Into the first ante-chamber to this world of tumbled plumes and tarnished shields he had just thrown his son and his ward. Could there be much hope of keeping up any clean and sturdy tradition in schools where the young of the capitulating upper caste would probably be overcrowed by the pushing progeny of its trashy captors or supplanters? He supposed his jolly, natural, uncommon Bron, who could have chatted and joked about plain things with Chaucer or Shakespeare, would now be planed and trimmed down to a stock pattern. His racy, coloured talk would be taken away; he would be pumped full of witless conventional tags—first the words and then, perhaps, the thoughts as well, of imitative dullards and vulgarians.

Molly, too? Would her famous school on the Fifeshire coast send her back at eighteen an indistinguishable unit in any of the bevies of drearily frisky young women with dead bluish-white noses whom Garth was beginning to notice in people's drawing-rooms, aping, as it seemed, the manners and looks of the London barmaids of his youth?

II

The thought that you may have failed to give two young creatures their chance of a fair run, for their only time on earth, is not the best companion to live with. Nor is a vacuous house by the Thames the cheeriest place in winter for this cohabitation. A mild and still humidity hangs heavily over the valley, month after month. The effect is one of immobile and listless eternity. It helps you to feel, if your own thoughts are running that way, as if the affairs you most cared for were wound up for ever, your business done and nothing left but to moulder like everything about you.

Garth, however, was not the man to let himself wallow

in warm baths of melancholy. Finding the new emptiness of his house too hollowly resonant for his good, he gave himself less of it. He increased his stodgy work to about twelve hours a day, dined out more than he had done since his wife's death, and looked up old friends of his youth from whom he had drifted apart. On most nights he slept at the Chantry in a small dressing-room next to the room that had been Winifred's. But now he retained a bedroom at his club, where he could turn in when work or some social engagement kept him in town very late.

Saturdays and Sundays, with their vacant hours, were the trouble. But Saturday afternoons were soon provided for. Garth found a satisfaction for one of his hungers in a kind of one-sided conversation with crowds at places where Londoners relax their work-a-day reserve in the happy ease of their spectatorship of sport. Now and then he would bring off a shot with both barrels by asking some one with whom he had played football at school or Oxford, and whom he had scarcely seen since, to join him and some thirty thousand others in watching the great League match of the day: Clement Wade, for example, that sterling "Soccer" forward at the 'Varsity, now a famous Liberal journalist in London. That was a great idea, Garth felt, as soon as it occurred to him. Why had he never thought of it before? Wade would delight in the wonderful play and in the thirty thousand lookers-on: he would be in his element: he would fraternise with the people.

III

Wade came, tall and gaunt as ever, but half-bald and grizzled, with blinking eyes and a stoop. He had the high-pitched, remonstrative voice that you hear from some dons who feel that they must be patient with this stupid world, but not weakly patient. His manner at luncheon showed a touch of surprise at Garth's choice of entertainment for this

afternoon of reunion. His note of acceptance had been curtly cordial, the note of a consciously overworked man.

On the ground they sat at one flank of a huge covered stand. A low partition separated them from the thirty thousand devotees who had paid their shilling apiece to stand up for the whole afternoon. "Colossal!" Wade murmured, surveying the vast bank of white faces that sloped upwards, all round the ground. "Colosseal! Imperial Roman!"

A famous Lancashire team were to play the best that London could show. Just beyond the partition a party of cloth-capped Bolton mill-hands were whiling time away with funny stories. One man triumphantly curled the tail of his yarn and then turned to a friend. "Thy turn, lad," he said, and the friend came out, like a shot, with a tale about a dog of his own—how it always got a-gate o' barking when any one came to t' house, and how a friend of his, one o' them nervous lads, had come round, one neeght, and rapped at door. "'Coom in,' says I, 'coom in, Ben, lad.' Ben hadn't nobbut oppen't door a teeny crack when dog oops an' flees at crack, barkin' like. 'Coom reet in, Ben,' says I, 'his bark's worse than 's bite.' 'Aye,' says Ben, '*I* know that, ahl reet. But does dog know?'"

Garth listened. He liked the yarn and the quick laugh that received it. He liked these men. At sunset yesterday they must have been standing at work in the electrically lighted mist of some reeking factory, two hundred miles away; all night they would have travelled in their boots by slow "trip train"; to-night they would do it again; they would reach their beloved, unlovely town among the Pennine moors in the haggard November dawn, still looking out on life and its humours with amused, unjaded eyes. That was our strength and our hope—the hardihood of the common man's unfastidious gusto; these were England's artesian wells of vitality; they reached down to inexhaustible central

waters of eagerness and will to live. Clement Wade did not seem to be taking much notice.

IV

From a cavern under the stands the teams came bouncing out on to the ground in succession, with an air of dutiful friskiness. Each was hailed with a roar, the home team with a mighty roar of recognition and encouragement, the Northerners with a lesser, but still a respectable, roar of sporting hospitality.

The party of amateurs from Bolton-le-Moors had first to scrutinise their heroes cannily, just to make sure that these were no changelings. One's dearest friends sometimes look strangely different, away from home.

"Yon Gawstang? Niver!"

"Aye, tha blind bat, tha; thot's Gawstang. Can't 'ee tell 'im by 'is big be'ind?"

"Wheer's Nickey?"

"Why, theer, on t' reet."

"Wot! 'Im that's spittin'?"

"Aye."

"Thot's reet. Thot's Nickey."

As soon as the work of identification was done, that of adjuration began. "Good ol' Bowton!" "Let 'em 'ave it, Nickey!" "Shove thy backside up agen 'em, Gawstang!" Their speech was as gross as earth and yet, like the earth, rudely clean; a kind of coarse health of the spirit showed through it.

Everywhere round the little Lancashire gang was the Londoner, less loud, less forthright, less sociable, keeping himself to himself, and yet civil, patient, quick to light up at a glint of comedy.

Garth had not been in a crowd for some weeks. He felt a familiar warmth re-invading his mind. It was akin to

the deep delight of looking out from a boat train, after an absence abroad, at the Kentish hop-gardens and orchards. English crowds did not change; they went on like the Thames and the Chilterns; they were like old things which art has caught as they passed by and has invested with a poignant imperishable beauty—the songs and the jesting in old Shallow's Gloucestershire garden, the candle-lit frolics in old city inns, the grunted dialogue of shivering carters that harnessed their jades in a dark tavern-yard before some mediæval dawn rose over Rochester. Garth's power of loving, stinted of certain other objects, had fastened, with all its disengaged strength, on this savoursome, immemorial Englishness of the English.

A sky-splitting roar broke in on this reverie. Garstang, of the ample haunches, had nattily kicked a goal, and the whole party from Lancashire had instantly detonated together, like a single cannon. One of its members was now triumphantly executing a few clog-dance steps; others were throwing their cloth caps to perilous heights; soon their separate impulses seemed to coalesce and they all sang in chorus, "Everything in Lancashire is reet oop to t' mark."

The Southrons, more conscious of class and correctitude, gazed, partly scandalised and partly amused, at these wild cattle from the North. The Northerners, in turn, enjoyed this comic effect of their own ardour on the primmer South. "Order there! I *must* have order," a Lancashire humourist said to his friends. "Tha'rt shockin' these quiet London lads." But the Londoners, too, had cheered Garstang's goal, and Lancashire's chaff of the capital was all friendly, in recognition of this piece of chivalry.

V

The whistle blew half-time. "You'd like to stretch your legs?" said Garth. They walked a little, up and down

cavernous corridors, the darksome bowels of the huge concrete stand. Through a door they caught glimpses of a lighted bar, with glasses of beer pushed about on its sloppy zinc counter.

The sight embittered Wade. "'Beer, beer, glorious beer,'" he quoted gloomily. "Is this what they come for?"

Garth explained. "A club owns the place. You or I couldn't buy a drink there. Only members."

Wade smiled, a smile wearily scornful. "Oh, yes, the club evil. Is it quite beyond human power, I wonder, for clubs to exist without becoming mere drinking-dens?"

"The Athenæum seems to bring it off," Garth pleaded mildly.

Wade made the gesture of brushing aside an irrelevance. "Yes, yes; of course. I don't mean clubs for educated men. It's in these working-men's clubs that the bar is a curse. They can't resist it."

Garth was not quick at dismissing as rubbish anything that a friend said: surely there must be something worth minding in what any one seriously thought, if only you could get at it. Still, he remembered young workmen whom he had seen taking their ease in their inn of an evening, over their modest social glass; also a Loders' Ball in his last term at Oxford—some sots from a fashionable college had come to it boozed and noisily drivelling: one of them had trodden on Garth's sister's dress and torn it so badly that she had gone away early, in tears, her hoped-for evening of happiness spoilt. No, the feeble scrubs were not all of one class. Wade must have made some sort of mistake.

They made their way back to their seats. Their Lancastrian neighbours had stood fast all the time, guarding their places. The funny stories were flowing again. "Mind owd Bill Townley?" one man was saying.

"Aye. 'E were a proper rough soart," said another.

" Mind wot 'appened to 'im," said the first, " ten years ago, 'fore Coop Final? "

" 'Ad a bit o' trouble, 'adn't he? "

" Aye. Seems a maate of 'is 'ad spoke out of 'is turn or summat. So Bill give 'im a bit of attention. 'E was a gradely boxer, was Bill—I saw t' other felly's faace when Bill 'ad done wi' 'im. T' other felly turned croosty an' summonsed owd Bill, an' magistraates give 'im a month on t' boards. It broke Bill's 'eart. 'Ow, Christ!' 'e says, 'I'll be in joog coom Saturday, an' Wanderers in t' Final!'

" Thot maade chief beak sit oop. 'You've booked?' 'e says.

" 'Aye,' says Bill, 'I've got me brief to Crystal Palace.'

" 'Wheer's ticket?' says beak, an' Bill 'ands it oop. Tell 'ee it were dirty. Bill 'ad been feelin' it with 'is 'and 'most every minute since 'e'd got it.

" 'Thot's reet enoof,' says beak, soon 's 'e'd looked it oaver. 'Saame block 's me own.' Then he leans down to clerk. ''As this felly,' 'e asks, 'any right to appeal to t' Sessions?'

" 'E would 'ave,' says clerk, 'if 'e 'adn't pleaded guilty.'

" 'The stoopid felly!' says beak. ''An' then we could ha' bailed him out?'

" 'Thot's reet,' says clerk.

" 'Prisoner,' says beak, 'tha'st got to amend yon defence. Not Guilty's t' word. 'Urry oop wi't, now.'

" 'But I done it,' says Bill. 'I 'it 'im. Look at 'is boko!'

" 'Tha silly gowk,' says beak, 'if ee doan't plead Not Guilty I'll give ee two months.' 'E turns to clerk. 'Theer,' he says; 'enter t' man's proper plea.' Clerk done it. 'Prisoner,' says beak, 'is released on 'is own 'cognisances, pendin' appeal.' Soa Bill saw Bowton win Coop,

an' then off to quod, 'appy. Appeal? Noa, Bill didn' want noa appeal."

This time Wade had listened: Garth noticed that. But to what? To a squalid tale of brutal assault, of magisterial misconduct, of universal preoccupation with a "commercialised" sport? Or to the voice of English good-humour, the old love of a game, a joke and a man who was a "character"? For both things, Garth saw, might be said to be there. There are both skin and bones in a head, though rays of one sort of light will show you only the skin, and another only the skull. Wade's face had a look of distaste. "I never went," he said, as the teams re-appeared, "to a bull-fight in Spain. But no doubt this gives one all the essentials."

"Isn't the bull an essential perhaps?" said Garth. "And the feeble old horses?"

"Oh, yes," Wade allowed, with a hard, wintry smile. 'At the last day we'll be able to perk up and say, 'We were decent to beasts.'"

"A good plea, too," Garth murmured, "so far as it goes."

VI

The game was running high; the crowd was held and stirred by the keen play, as it shifted this way and that: the sudden groans of dismay and quick sighs of relief thickened into one continuous undulating roar that only stopped when a Lancashire player was slightly hurt. The game paused and the Northerners' trainer, a podgy little cloth-capped man, came scudding out from the cavern under the stand, with a towel and sponge in his hands, and carried off his wounded man, picky-back, to the edge of the turf. While the trainer ministered there, the whistle blew, the game went on, and, lo! in another minute a second Lancastrian was disabled—winded in mid-field. The trainer looked up,

comically distracted by this second stroke of fate. Then he swiftly relinquished the first of his battered nurslings and flew to the aid of the second.

The crowd laughed sympathetically, as it watched the little homely worried man. "'Orf gows mother," a Cockney near our friends said, "to mind the new biby."

Next moment the London team's trainer came fleeting out like the wind, sponge and towel in hand and coat-tails flying, to tend the patient whom his rival had had to abandon; and then, as quick as the amused and friendly laugh before, came a clapping of hands from everybody, north and south, in approval of this prompt little impulse of sportsmanship. Garth felt himself to be absurdly moved: golden moments, rare and unforgettable, when all the separate hearts of a crowd give a little generous jump together, however trivial the occasion. "The great heart of the people"—yes, there was such a thing, though rhetoricians said so.

The grey light was thickening as the game went on, the turbid rose-red disc of the cold sun sank sombrely into a high bank of mist. All over the high embankment of faces that rose round the ground the perpetual striking of matches, now here and now there and always somewhere, twinkled more brightly as twilight came on. Half closing his eyes, Garth could see them, not as separate sparks but as one wide continuous shimmer, like the radiant pulse that beats in a frosty night sky. That, again, made the holiday crowd seem more utterly one, as the firmament does when all the stars seem to throb to one rhythm.

Garth glanced at Wade. Could it be that old Clement was feeling nothing of this? But Wade's face was chilly and weary. Hadn't they better, said Wade, clear out now, before they got caught in the crowd at the end of the match —a hansom might be unprocurable then.

VII

Wade's spirits rose as the hansom sped eastward. He thanked Garth for the little outing. Yes, we ought, he said, to see these portents of our times. "Only," he cautioned his friend, "don't confuse your football crowds with the British democracy."

"Is there somebody else?" said Garth, simply. "Oh, you mean the fellows who go off alone on their bikes on a Saturday afternoon, to watch birds? They're good fellows too. And the ones that just dig in the garden? They're great. Something like success in life, to find the digging business thrill you every time!"

Wade smiled austerely: "It isn't exactly the bird-fanciers that I mean. Nor even the amateur gardeners." Wade was undoubtedly cheering up as the distance grew between him and the sight and sound and smell of that monstrous crowd—so gross, so childish, the sport of trashy "herd-emotions." Now, with the mob well out of the way, he could see the real People again, the vast public meeting of men and women who might or might not have read Mill and Spencer, but were, anyhow, rationalists and utilitarians and positivists in their hearts. To see the people, he warned Garth, you must stand off a little; else you would not see the wood for the trees.

But Garth loved the wood, tree by tree—the adorable oddness of individual persons in body and soul; their wilfully independent valuations of things; their seemingly irrational —perhaps super-rational—quests of queer grails which struck them as holy or delightful Why, it was for that he liked Wade. But how explain such things to him? Wade's lips would curl; they would have that pitying smile; he would say "Oh, if it comes to mysticism——" and make as if to wash his hands free of cobwebs.

Garth did not try to explain.

At the north-west corner of Kensington Gardens they paid off their cab and set out on the ever-beautiful walk across the three parks to Pall Mall. Dusk had come; as they penetrated the depths of the Gardens the mist soon effaced the lamp-marked line of the Bayswater Road; soon the multitudinous roar of the street traffic softened itself to a soothing murmur. They might have been in some misty solitude of the Andes, hearing far below them the slow beat of the Pacific surf on a sequestered beach.

Thus abstracted from life's sordid touch, Wade's theoretic fervour could let itself go. In a minute or two he was extolling with true eloquence the hero of his visions, the "average citizen," or "common man," as Wade called this paragon: just, inoffensive, pure and wise—give him a real chance and see how soon he would put to rights all that was wrong in our present sad state. Garth listened more than he spoke; he could not escape from that notion of his that there must be something in anything that was seriously said by a sane, upright man, and he knew Wade to be that.

They passed into Hyde Park. Couples were whispering here, plastered close to the trunks of big trees; a girl and a tall soldier, hardy with passion, lay embraced on the damp grass. Wade's flow of eloquence flagged: here was life failing again; it refused to live up to his austere visions; it showed only creatures sensual, shiftless, uncontrolled—beings for whom there was nothing to do but tighten many laws so as to save them from making a bet or buying a drink, or spitting on the ground or leaving bits of orange-peel in their wake, not to mention sins more grievous. He quoted sourly from Taine's book about England a note on the shameless loves of Guardsmen in Hyde Park. What possessed us to keep whole battalions of Guards in London at all? Was it

merely to give electric shocks to travelling Frenchmen's sense of decency?

Wade came of the business patriciate—the traders of old-standing wealth and high civilisation, the breed that had fought their way into a place in the sun, some seventy years before, the men of the Reform Bill and the Anti-Corn-Law League. There lingered in him still the resentful instinct of a snubbed, insurgent class against a dominant and indolently snubbing one. It was apt to blaze out at any reminder of the Army, the Navy or diplomacy, the services traditionally officered by the sons of the enemy, the old owners of the land. So now the waters were let loose and Garth contributed less than ever to the talk. Official life had taught Garth plenty of things that would now have served only too well to illustrate Wade's diatribe against the War Office. But Garth held his tongue. Wade needed no spurring along his favourite road. Garth had insensibly cast himself in late years for the part of a moderator, a blower of froth off all the various full flagons of rhetoric, a doer or remembrancer of things which the fiery braves of all parties were apt to neglect in their fine frenzies of antipathy.

Only at Hyde Park Corner was Wade's flow of words held up for a minute, while they committed themselves to the little sea of traffic-swept roadway and navigated its jostle and swirl of cross-currents. Beyond it the shades of the Green Park swallowed them up and Wade could safely be pungent and trenchant and scathing and aphoristic and antithetic and epigrammatic again. More and more his talk was of abstract things ending in "ism"—nationalism, Imperialism, militarism, Cæsarism, many more; he marshalled and reviewed them; he made them march and countermarch and contend and react; he shifted them hither and thither like children's bricks and lead soldiers, which are so easy to move as you will.

Garth looked on, civilly and patiently, at this intellectual war-game. He was too proud to claim his fair half of a talk or to want to print any idea of his upon any one else's mind.

"I'm afraid I've been gabbling," said Wade, as they parted in Pall Mall, each to his club. He spoke with a compunctious little smile that was rather engaging, a little gleam of frosty sunshine flickering up on his hungry, arrogant face. "You always listened too well. You betrayed us all into chattering."

Garth said, quite sincerely, "I like to hear about things." He shook hands warmly at their farewell. Wade might say what he liked; he would still be a friend of Garth's youth and an irreplaceable piece of the past. Had they not rowed in the same boat at school?

CHAPTER V

I

WHILE he dressed in his attic room at the club Garth stood up manfully, at the sessions of silent thought, for old Wade. Even if he had not been old Wade, Garth would have had to make the best of him now; to do anything else would have been scrubby, like slating a man who has just left the room, after letting him talk and never withstanding him to his face.

But what a lot of people Wade seemed to dislike, with all his love of humanity at large—not even of one nation only. Garth thought of the old Sophists, the fellows who taught wisdom—perhaps taught it quite decently well—and yet had it not. Could one be a philanthropist without love? Or a humanitarian without much humaneness? Perhaps. Besides, Wade was sound timber; he worked for great ends, as he saw them; he did not live softly, nor scheme for himself. Besides, there was something stout in the way that Wade kept up his end. Most of those wealthy old Liberal clans, indeed most of the men of Wade's own, had bought big estates, and then the older rural caste had put its women on to them and they had intermarried and quietly fused themselves into the territorial breed that they had envied and drubbed; and then they had taken the line that gave them the most social ease and had become, by "protective assimilation," the bluest of Tories. Wade was tougher than that, anyhow; he was a good old wild elephant, not to be coralled nor coaxed into tameness by females. If you could say as much of all the men in a nation, that nation could do anything. Besides, they had rowed in the same boat at school, and they had been at Oxford together.

Garth left his window open, after his custom. Through it there penetrated gleams and sounds of mid-London, awake

for the night; lights near and far; and a bugle blowing from the barracks, across St. James's Park, its remote and melancholy call; and the ceaseless light thud of the feet of horses drawing inaudible wheels, a thud that came lively and quick from hoofs that trotted free in the Mall, but slow from a corner below the window where every horse was pulled in for the turn. What a stir it had made in his mind long ago, whenever he came up to town from Oxford, this vesper London all a-tingle with flitting lights and festal hastening. "This is life, life!"—he had always felt, exultantly, then, as his hansom shot out from under the roof of Paddington Station. Wade had come up with him once; the two had gone to the play and seen the rising star of Irving, and heard the chimes at midnight together. No, there couldn't be much wrong with old Wade. And now he was to see the other thing; he was going to dine in Audley Square with Mrs. Barbason, the mother of Claude —a portly and predominant person: thanks to the death of her good man, a dull fellow and a sad drag on her socially, she had become of late one of the most militant hostesses of the Conservative party.

II

Garth met at her door Lord Wynnant, the old ambassador, better known by his old name of Horace March. Him a pretty and insignificant cousin of Garth's had married long ago and enriched with two sons, the younger of them the lively Colin whom you know. Wynnant's elderly face, white but far from austere, had a moustache that sank the wearer of any common moustache in despair. You could not have thought beforehand that there was such beauty in any moustache as resided in those two light wisps of blond hair, blown horizontally out, as it were, in two delicate and tapering streamers to right and left. The rest of his face had the regulation lines of the blood Englishman—the modelling of

nose, chin, lips and eyes—only, somehow, a little bit overdone, as if some handsome but very slightly raffish actor had got himself up as a Bohun or a Mowbray of the prime.

"Thomas," said Wynnant, with the ambrosial smile that he always had when he spoke—under the moustache it looked like a pretty woman's vivacity in the shade of a bright parasol—"let us cling together closely to-night. These good Tory ladies' feasts are becoming absolute *morgues*. Wailing and gnashing of teeth. To eat at such boards a man must have the supports of friendship as well as of religion."

Sure enough, the times were gloomy, in houses like this. There was no longer a Boer War now to busy the giddy minds of the crowd; once more the vulgar were raising prickly questions at home; Lord Salisbury, the sturdy old lion of the Conservative party, had died; his frailer successor's Ministry was falling to pieces; resignation followed resignation; every by-election brought a new loss and a darker portent. Clearly a smash was coming, whether a remediable minor smash, like the last little victory of the Radicals, or *the* smash, the grand final smash that must come at some time or other, the break-up of Empire and of all things good, the penalty of all the years of pandering and truckling to the mob.

Wynnant was right. They were to have it all out; over the very soup the inquest on the departed glory of Israel was reopened. Mrs. Barbason's explanation was trenchant and brusque—just that Incarnate Evil, the Ancient Prince of Hell, had arisen again, in uncommon good fettle this time. Oh, he would do plenty of harm. And then we should shake off our sloth and take a short run and kick him back again to his own place. It sounded so simple. The lady was much given to simplifying as well as to those abrupt

freedoms of speech that easily pass as wit from the lips of masterful dowagers, the *esprits forts* of dull circles.

Too simple, Wynnant suavely suggested, always with the ambrosial smile at play between the fair grizzled moustache and his fine shapely teeth. Wasn't the whole world changing?—Richard Strauss coming to London to make all our old music sound stale; stockbrokers casting off care and singing "Let's go a-Maying" and walking to Brighton for prizes *coram populo*; newspapers giving up print, to have pretty pictures instead; some people putting down their carriages—trying to get about in these new motor-cars that always had the driver lying supine on the road, underneath them, gazing adoringly up at their vitals; all the world cheering up, larking about, attempting the light touch—and turning, perhaps, from "us steady old people" to give a fair chance to the Strausses of public affairs, the red-hot fire-carriages of politics? Unprejudiced, unprincipled, Wynnant poured out his frivolous stuff—piled it up into a sort of rickety dam, to keep the more serious sorts of foolishness from utterly flooding the conversation.

Vain attempt, he knew well. His own wife had her solemn *niaiserie* to contribute. "I may be utterly wrong," she said in a weary way that she had, "but I can't help thinking the country—the real England, you know—must hate all this court we're paying to France—and it not three years since the Kaiser was so nice in coming to dear Queen Victoria's funeral! After all, the French *are* Republicans still, however we try to blink it. Why should we turn to them now, and away from all our dear Queen's relations? Horace and I were absolutely happy at Berlin—happier far than at Paris, although of course at Paris the big Embassy garden is lovely. The Prussians, you know! Their loyalty to their King! And their discipline!—so unlike the wild street driving in Paris, which really does explain the regicide

and the Terror and Jacobinism and everything. Honestly, can we blame English people for feeling the French are not quite the friends they would care to be seen walking with? It might be those awful Americans next. And if ever there came a great war, we might have all the rag, tag and bobtail of the world hanging on to our coat-tails and boasting they were our allies."

Wynnant's face remained demurely inexpressive during this performance of his dame's. He looked across at Garth, as if to ask for his fair share of credit for taking it well—"See how stoutly I bear our common cross, yours and mine, of a connection with this foolish lady." But Garth gave no answering look. And then their hostess burst in, with her hustling robustness. "A great war?—that's all we need—all of us. But the dregs need it most. They're simply flabby with comfort—absolutely uppish and pert with sheer safety. They need a life-or-death job, in the field, to let 'em see the hole they'd be in if they hadn't their betters to lead 'em."

Garth listened. He tried to find all the rightness he could in the good woman's words. He rummaged his mind for recollections of any recent feats of born captaincy in our nation's affairs. Nothing came to hand except a sight he had seen lately—the Prime Minister speaking to a great Lancashire crowd. He remembered the slack, charmful figure poised and swaying on the platform—a gracious dilettante, a lovable sceptic, a courtly toyer with delicate doubts and amateur of drams of intellectual exhilaration—struggling to give a lead, in urgent matters of national practice, to the thousands of blunt realists before him—and these trying equally hard to get some guidance from him, going half-way to meet it and greet it if only it would come; but no guidance coming; no lead that a plain soul could follow; and then the little bursts of cheers coming farther

and farther apart as the meeting went on; the audience, that had been all ears at first, lapsing at last into apathy, for all its humble friendliness; the sheep looking up to be fed, and no food arriving.

But Mrs. Barbason was surging along: "'Labour leaders'! Funny phrase. God knows what Labour is to them, or they to Labour. And yet they call themselves 'Labour leaders'! A war would pretty soon do for them all—them and their traitorous cant about peace. They'd be stoned in the streets—that's my prophecy." She turned abruptly on Garth, who sat on her left, and put to his head a pistol-like question: "Am I talking nonsense? Or not?"

"Well," said that patient hearer, "you prophets ought to know about stoning."

III

There were only eight at the table. Enough, too, Garth would have said: conversation ought to be general: of course it gave bores a wider field for their devastations; still, it made people stand fire; the old Spartan was all for giving of proofs and winning of spurs.

Four of the eight you know. The rest were Colonel Hubbock-Orde, a lifelong War Office soldier; George Roads, the new man, the owner of many new and auriferous newspapers; and the wives of these two. Hubbock-Orde was undersized and wizened; he had a peaky nose, a bad chin, a tiny moustache, mouse-coloured and waxed, and little fidgety eyes. In spite of all this unkindness of Nature's he was conscientiously trenchant in speech, he played with a will the plain blunt soldier-man's part. "Why wait for a war?" he cut in, with that Wellingtonian brusqueness. He'd teach these civilians. "We don't wait for war to discipline troops. We get 'em in hand during peace. Same with a nation. You've got an undisciplined nation, you

politicians. That's your trouble. You've let 'em run wild. These silly elections are only a symptom. You've got to get your men in hand."

Mrs. Barbason nodded approvingly. Roads found his voice: he even detached his eyes from his victuals. "How d'you do it?" he asked. No doubt he earnestly wanted to know. He was an obviously underbred person of forty or so, with too much flaccid flesh, and he cultivated a laboured intensity of expression, like "still strong men" in weak movie plays: under his pasty skin the flabby facial muscles were industriously clenched; but through this screen any observant person like Garth or Wynnant could see a flurried little soul crouching or shuffling about behind it. "I've tried, myself," he said. "It's all no go." In fact all his boundlessly circulating ha'porths of sensational assertion and detraction had lately been used, in the course of some obscure negotiation for a peerage, to prop up the falling cause. Yet nobody seemed to mind. The sea rose and rose and poor little Canute was bewildered.

"It's perfectly simple," the Colonel said. "Give 'em an order—that's all."

"*Par exemple*——?" said Wynnant. Here was fun for him.

"Oh, any old order will do," said the Colonel. "Only —see that it's obeyed. Then give another, and see that it's obeyed too. And then go on doing it over and over again, till they're disciplined."

"You speak," said Mrs. Barbason, "the Bible truth."

"You see," the Colonel said triumphantly. "Any order's good enough to show who's master. But why not begin with National Service? And call it Conscription? There's no need to funk the plain name."

Garth's mind clung to concrete things if he could get them; if not, then to first-hand reports of them. So there

came back to him now a scrap of a dialogue that he had heard by chance in a Dorsetshire ale-house; two sergeants whose tunics seemed to record much active service were talking solemnly over two pints of beer; one of them had said: "When I'm in a proper'ot shop—same as you and me was at Chitral—I don't want no bloody conscrip' anywhere near me." "Gawd, no!" the other had answered, with fervour.

Still, Garth did not raise the point. "Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgement!"—that was only common sense; Colonels, as well as sergeants, deserved to be heard about their own trade. So he said nothing till Mrs. Roads, a stumpy woman with a blank blue and white face, and many spiky confections of big diamonds indenting ghastlily the dead-white fat of her bosom, said that the person for whom *she* felt was the King, if ever he should be forced to put up with a pack of Radical Ministers. "Just think," she said, "of having to have them in his house!"

Wynnant's eyes twinkled. Even Mrs. Barbason, who knew that Roads had to be patted and stroked for the good of the cause, smiled rather cruelly at the poor woman's assumption of a right to sympathise with the social agonies of the august. But Garth was always almost helplessly merciful to people helplessly absurd. "Oh, come," he remonstrated gently, "Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman is the best of company."

"I thought it was he," said Mrs. Hubbock-Orde, "who drove the Duke of Cambridge out of the Army?"

The merciless humour in Wynnant's fine eyes turned from the first female guy to the second. These War Office ladies from Hampstead were famous pasture for an ironist. "Isn't that, perhaps," Wynnant asked, "what endears our 'C. B.' to the King?"

Mrs. Hubbock-Orde came as near to snorting as any prim

woman might. "Of course," Wynnant blandly went on, "he has less wit than Vernon Harcourt. Harcourt's the wittiest fellow in London. But 'C. B.' has more humour."

"Oh, he's a funny man, is he?" Mrs. Hubbock-Orde's voice would have withered all Laodiceans and wits if it could.

IV

When the women were out of the way, Roads came more fully to life and began to give tongue to some purpose. To do this, he needed port, a cigar and the retrospect of a non-irritant dinner. Given these things, God was with him and Roads would unbend and give gratuitous tips to companies of the kind with whom he dined in these latter days and whom he held to be mostly fools, though he longed with all the little force of his soul to be more like them. "I do wish to God that I could be a gentleman," Roads had once said to Garth in one of the confidential fits that Garth unwittingly inspired in many people who were merely acquaintances. That avowal had bound Garth over to toleration of Roads. What can you do when a man throws down all his defences before you, even a man who ought to be kicked?

Roads had only one subject—himself and his "phenomenal" rise, as he called it—the "record" circulation of his prints. He must have felt that every one else was thinking of this all the time and longing to know how it was done. So it was with an air of doing his best for his friends that he now proceeded to wrench the talk round to the one loved theme. "Study your public honestly—faithfully," he was saying presently. "That's the whole secret. That and science."

"Science Siftin's and sich?" said the Colonel loftily. "'Hours with a Microscope'?"

"Lor', no!" said Roads; "there isn't a cent in that bleat." He settled down to give golden wisdom away.

"You just mark up your chart—that's all. And study it like Hell."

"What chart?" said Hubbock-Orde, still rather airily. "Weather?"

"Yes, in a way," Roads explained. "You mark up the daily net sales of your paper—on a curve—a diagram thing. And then, some time when sales seem pretty average, you try a new feature—'Turf notes and notions,' or 'Books that have Pep,' or that thing we're trying out now in *The Day*—'The Bread of Life: the Christian's Daily Crumb.' You keep it up every day for a fortnight and watch the curve on the chart. Then you drop that feature for a fortnight; then you put it on again; and all the time you keep on watching your sales on the chart. The chart may show nothing at all—the feature hasn't mattered a damn, either way. But now and then the curve goes up a little bit during the second week of the fortnight the feature is in, and down again during the second week of the fortnight it's out. Then you *may*—though it isn't sure yet—have got hold of a winner; so you feel round a bit more, just to eliminate possible causes of error. And then, when at last you've got a dead cert, you back it, all in, like a man. Science and guts—that's all there is to it. Simply keep your hand on the pulse of the nation. Any of you men could do it, just the same as me."

"Sounds logical," said Hubbock-Orde, decidedly impressed. "But what about these rotten by-elections? Didn't your papers say we should romp? What was the matter? All the curves got out of curl?"

Perhaps the unconscious Colonel touched a more tender spot than he knew. Science must have been urging Roads at that time to make at least some civil gesture towards the rising sun of the Liberal party. And yet the setting sun held that half-promised peerage; it could not be forsaken.

And yet, again, the sun might set faster than science could estimate—sink suddenly into the ocean, peerage and all. So Roads' vesper serenity might well be a little perturbed as he replied, "Well, I'm a Conservative, same as every one, ain't I? And how would *you* fight elections? Put up on a placard 'The Radical wins. Still, we're open to votes'? If you had to make a last stand in a war, would you say to your men 'Nothin' doin'. We're licked. Still, you can fire away if you like'?"

There was something in that, the Colonel allowed. "Mind you," Roads went on, "when I say that I'm a Conservative, I don't say I'm a stick-in-the-mud. I'm out to face facts every time. If it do turn out that all England is turning right round at this next general election—mind, I don't say yet that it is, but still, if the good old Conservative cause *should* become a back number, for keeps, same as the crinoline—well, I don't say but I *might* have to go with the country. 'My country right or wrong,' you know—that's good enough for me. Fact is, I'm just off to Algiers for a month or two now, to think it all out, and I'm just giving my editors one simple order for while I'm away: 'Be fair to all parties, till further instructions.'"

You see, Wynnant was reputed one of the Prime Minister's intimates. Possibly Roads was discharging a kind of ultimatum into the air, to be picked up by whoever might have his receivers properly tuned—"Hurry up there with that peerage. I can't wait for ever."

V

No doubt Roads instinctively knew his man, up to a point. These animals live by such instincts. Diplomacy was Wynnant's trade, and an unfastidious sense of comedy his recreation. To him Roads was an entertaining "character part," a grotesque to be prized and guarded and egged on to

abound in his own line of grotesqueness. Certainly Roads ought to have his peerage, or anything else that might be needed to keep him performing in these stupid old Tory houses where such fun was scarce; Roads was even more *impayable* than that quaint deposit of Time's, Hubbock-Orde, with his droll illusion of knowing his own mind though he had no mind to know. Roads was the prime low comedian, the proper foil to that tall figure of high comedy, Garth, the old lion who suffered the monkey, the ass and the parrot gladly and never gave them up as no good. "The Old Stone Man," Wynnant once said to me, "sees us all rushing round and yelling out how we're the men who know what's what. *He* does know, and yet he keeps still—if he let on that he knew, he'd feel as if he were swaggering round in a cheap bookie's coat with shillings sewn on, all over the front. And yet, through some twist in his mind, he thinks we're worth talking to."

To-night, when Roads had found his tongue, Wynnant had quoted aloud to Garth a version of the hymn:

> "Soon as the stars of night prevail,
> Our friend takes up his wondrous tale,
> And nightly to the listening earth
> Relates the story of his worth."

Wynnant was genially insolent; he relied on the dullness of Roads' wits and the thickness of his skin. But Garth took it coldly. Garth was not joining his friend in the mediæval diversion of putting a half-witted clown, blind for choice, on the stage, to amuse the house, between whiles, with his queer capers and frothings.

Wynnant was not hurt by this coldness. Just the opposite. Garth was all the more Garthian for being like that. "Every man in his humour"—that was the only sound rule—the way to enrich the great little comedy.

CHAPTER VI

I

GARTH wanted to reach home that night. So he caught the last train to Sheane: thence a riverside walk of half an hour would leave him with only the breadth of the river between him and the Chantry. The ferryman would be gone home to bed, but all was arranged; the Chantry punt would be lying padlocked to the ferry landing-place, for Garth to take himself across. He often did, at these hours.

You would not half express the loneliness of that riverside walk at midnight in winter by saying you would meet nobody there. Solitude can go further than that: a graveyard is lonelier than a meadow, and any solitude may be deepened at night by the blinking of a light in some distant window—by anything, in fact, that sharpens your sense of being excluded.

The path was banked up high, for safety from floods; along it you walked hoisted up in the air; you looked down on one side to the river and on the other to a vast field, a mile square, where kings used to hunt deer. It was dead low water to-night, so the quietude of the stream was deep; only a furtive occasional whisper from some trickle of water breaking over a pebble below interrupted a hush that seemed almost studied. Far out on the great stretch of grass an old horse stood motionless, knee-deep in white mist, and coughed patiently. Overhead, a broken line of big chestnut trees darkened some parts of the way; now and then there would just rise into hearing the faint groan or whine of a bough chafed by some other bough that was too flabby to hold out its own weight at arm's length.

Garth was a Stoic, but not insensible. He gave to the pressure of the hour and the place—at any rate so far that

his thoughts, as he stepped out on the walk, grew more fluent without becoming less sombre. The figures he had seen since noon came up for his mind to review, and the men delighted him not, nor the women either. First there was Clement Wade, the inclement, the man of democratic principle and anti-democratic heart, extolling the people's wisdom and hating its company, burning with a kind of chilly fire, a friar's lantern kindled out of mists and coldness. Garth had known Liberals whom he felt to have got hold of some essential portion of rightness—men fired with a mettlesome glow of eagerness that the common man should have licence to live out his life in a way of his own, if he chose, and to have a fair say in the settling of things. That was virile; that was the right check on any fool rulers who rode a country always on the curb, in a perpetual funk lest it buck. But these iced intellectuals whose creed was all "Noes"—a litany of scornful disbelief in Empire, Army, Navy, in symbol and tradition, in the rude patriotism of the simple, in almost every little effort we made to keep up our end in the world. "Yes—yes, by God; I do believe"—that was what ought to light and warm men's hearts—some animating fervour of admiration and love for something or other, some passionate sense of kinship with common, warm-blooded life and its ways.

But where to find it? In the men like Hubbock-Orde, the Forcible Feeble, stamping his weak little foot and crying out for his poor little untaught will to be done? In Wynnant, that jolly atheist, a king of unbelievers, to whom England was an agreeable house soon to come down? Drink up the cellar, eat up the deer in the park while any were left—that was the wisdom of the Wynnants. In Roads? Poor Roads, a fit object for pity, like all human guys, but also a peril, a new breed added to England's old parasites, a mosquito that might lay waste a whole country while only trying to

suck a few drops of blood for itself. And those women at dinner, not even waiting for a "class-war" to be waged by the hosts from the slums, but waging it themselves already with their puny poisoned darts — as if the first-class passengers on an endangered liner were to send the labouring crew a sneering message of defiance. Poor old ship! Poor old England!

Since he had gone out of political life he had gained, by no wish of his own, an odd new position close to its core. One reigning statesman after another had formed an unaccountable habit of wanting to know what Garth thought. When they meditated their grand *coups* they would send for him, just to see how these bright notions struck him. They hardly ever struck him precisely as they struck the party's agents or its press. But more than once they had apparently struck most of the electors afterwards as they had struck Garth at first and not as they had struck those confident professional diviners. To some of the great and wise—and not in his own party only—these occasional conversations with Garth had come to serve as exploratory borings into that enigmatic mass of fundamental rock "the mind of the country," about which they all talked so intimately, and which they so sincerely wished that they could understand. Neither sanguine nor soured, nor spiteful, nor timid, he seemed to have attained a realism of judgement which was more difficult for themselves. Besides, they soon found out two things. No title, star or ribbon need be offered to Garth in payment for these services. And any secret confided to him was like a very small stone dropped into a very deep well.

So Garth knew things not told to electors—the things that were then whitening the hair of the best statesmen. He had been taken behind all the showy façades. He had seen the Navy, not on parade—the feuds of the Admirals; the flash

Armada of new " super-ships " on which the nation's willing bounty was being spent to placate a few greedy traders in false news and public excitement while possible enemies were working in silence to bring our boasted super-ships down to the status of fat bathers in a bay full of sharks. The War Office, too,—still just what he had known it in his year of service there—the eager, cunning scramble for snug billets, the pushing crowd of middling characters and brains long cut off from the regimental life that can keep soldiering wholesome; the snarls and grumbles and intrigues against the few real soldiers who tried to drag the sloths and the shirkers along. And—who knows?—a great war might come.

He pulled himself in. What the deuce was he doing? Maundering, thinking rhetorically, luxuriating in a warm bath of voluptuous despair? A beastly idea! Truth, of course, was never rhetorical, always mixed and qualified: rotters there were, but the country still swarmed with good tryers—splendid nobodies who kept the world going round and said nothing about it; the sound England behind the flash mask would always astound you afresh. Besides, there were the young, with their magnificent chance. To Garth, as he looked back from middle-age, it seemed almost beyond imagination that other men should not make more than he of the boundless opportunities of youth.

He wrenched his mind away, by a kind of force, from futile melancholy. He made for his old refuge from the mean slough of self-pity—the next thing to be done. Wasn't there some next thing to be done?

II

Yes, of course, he remembered it now. Wynnant had lazily passed on to Garth a petition for help from the headmaster of Chellingham, their old school, to which

Auberon was presently to go. Curwen, or "Tyke," the famous old Yorkshire player, who had for twenty years been the cricket coach at Chellingham, had suddenly died of appendicitis. Could Garth, as an old cricket Blue, suggest a worthy successor to Tyke in this great office? Rather! Of course he would try. He would begin to try now. A hundred yards farther on there was a long and floridly carved timber seat by the path. He found it dry, sat down at the end that came first and plunged into practical thought, reviewing carefully such cricket pros of his day as had been fit to receive the adoration of boys. There was Short, who used to be the one pro in the Hallamshire team and, as Wynnant had once said, its only gentleman too. And Moulding, of Kent, a man of clean oak, fit to bring up young princes.

From where he sat thinking, the Chantry was just within sight: the light that burned for his return dotted the colourless landscape with one steady spark. Also across the stream, but much nearer, were two larger houses. Darkness had turned them into mere blocks of blackness, blotting out details of surface and leaving visible only the figure that each mansion presented in silhouette against the watery pallor of the sky.

One of the two figures stood regally up to face this hard test of the fundamental quality of a building. It showed a noble assemblage of masses stately and reposeful; the genius of its early eighteenth-century builder came out in the dark like a star disengaged from its day-time obscurity. Seated, as Garth knew, on a knoll made of gravel, it lifted clear of low mists. It looked straight down an avenued reach of the river, a kind of woodland glade half a mile long, turfed with water. Gistleham Church and the Chantry filled the far end of this divine vista.

The other house stood three hundred yards farther down-

stream, and now exactly opposite Garth. Its sky-line might have been that of a slum. Roofs, towers and chimneys were fretted into freakish incoherence; they were a dull tale told by an idiot, a flow of architectural gibberish. This mess was plumped down on the low alluvial clay, almost on the foreshore mud. It seemed to shun, of set purpose, the ravishing view down the sylvan river avenue closed by the pedestalled church and the embowered Chantry.

It *was* of set purpose. Garth knew. He had reason to. The fine house had been built for the first Lord Follett, the Admiral, at the noon of his fame. The second house had been built, only twelve years ago, by the seventh peer of that name. To Garth, as Chairman of the local Petty Sessions, it had fallen, thirteen years ago, to send this nobleman to prison for an indecent assault on a little girl, committed in drink. Follett had taken this sentence as an unneighbourly and sanctimonious act and as a piece of disloyalty to the upper orders of the nation. When he came back from jail he used to say to such friends as would still dine with him, "Can't stand this house. Not a Jack window in it but looks bang down the reach, right into that holy prig Garth's bloody midden." So, being rich enough to spare himself pain, Follett had built house number two and had sold house number one to the governors of a charity-school for daughters of charwomen. The peer had celebrated his flitting with the only public benefaction of his life. He had given for the public use—as it could not be kept private—the seat on which Garth was now sitting. Here Follett would sit on fine days, look across at his new house, and chuckle over the way he had got the better of Garth.

When Garth had done his practical thinking and had provisionally resolved to recommend Moulding, he sat on for a few moments, eyeing the two houses and fascinated by

that rather magical trick that the darkness had of subduing some qualities in an architect's work and laying all the stress on others. Like adversity, wasn't it? It made the bigger qualities show through. While he gazed he suddenly found that an awareness of something new and strange was rising up in him with steady swiftness till it almost shouted: "Look out! Quick! You're not alone!"

III

He turned his head sharply round to the right. Sure enough, some figure was sitting deep in the shadow that obscured the opposite end of the seat, close under the great chestnut's trunk. A moment more and he perceived that the figure was leaving its corner and sidling furtively along, still in a sitting position, towards himself.

Garth did not stir. "Well?" he asked harshly. The furtive approach instantly stopped. By now the figure had moved one-third of the length of the seat and was less deep in shadow. It was a big man's.

A kind of exhilaration began to tingle in Garth. Action, risk perhaps? Life, that turbid and intricate business, seemed to run clear at a touch from those elementary things. "Well, what's *your* trouble?" he asked in a voice rather less grim.

"Wha' the 'ell's that to you?" the man snarled.

"Try sitting back in your corner," said Garth. "You'll talk better."

The man jumped up. "A six-footer," thought Garth.

"*You*'re damned regimental," the man blustered down at him.

Garth felt the glee that comes when some little physical crisis sets your simplest faculties working above themselves. How long would it take this fellow to reach him and strike? As long as it would take himself to spring up and parry? He did the sum with an exultant sense of leisure and ease.

By the time it was done, the man had flopped down at the far end of the seat, grumbling sulkily, "'Oo's seat is this? Yourn? Can't a man 'ave a sit without bloody parsons comin' roun', haskin' wot's up with 'is soul?"

"Don't waste the aitch business on me," replied Garth. "You're a sahib trying to come the low-caste. Is that settled?"

The man gave a grunt.

"Well? *Après?*" said Garth. "Have you got a revolver?"

The man's plebeian accent came off in one piece, like a coat. "You're a pretty calm bird," he said, in the speech of the gently bred. "You trump my lead, first round, and then you say, 'Got any trumps of your own?' Yes, I have a revolver."

"Real thing?" said Garth. "I don't mean a big briar pipe, to hold by the bowl when you point it at people."

"You'll see. And I've got something more."

"Meaning——?"

"Meaning I don't care a damn. See? Whatever I do now, they can't give me anything worse to stick than I've had. I've tried all the hells there are. Quod isn't in it, beside 'em. I've failed and shirked and cadged and starved. It's funny how strong you are when you get down to that. You're free from a rare lot of things. You've done with the 'sportsman and gentleman' business that keeps a lot of us tame. You're quit of the whole damn caboodle of old inhibitions—that's the word, isn't it, now? Why, I'd kill a King for what he's got on him. I'd burn the Abbey down to dry my boots. See? the desperate man, that's what *you're* up against." The fellow seemed to be trying to work himself up to a great pitch of rage, without much real force. He was like the old second-rate pirates who chewed broken glass so that they might look bloody.

"Oh, you're a terrible fellow—that's clear," Garth dryly said. "It looks as if I should have to make you walk five yards ahead, with your hands up, when we move on."

"And who's to move *me* on, if I may ask?" he snarled like an outcast cur, vicious and weak with ill-usage, that bares its teeth the moment you try to stroke it.

Garth asked, "Is a bed of any use to you?"

"Bed!" The man almost gasped. Then the wariness of the hunted revived in him. "One of the canny Samaritans —hey? 'Here's the price of a doss, my man, so run away and don't molest me.' Ransom—hey? No, no. It runs to a bit more ransom than that."

"It did," said Garth. "I was inviting you to my house." He pointed down the avenue of trees and stream to the Chantry's firmly shining symbol of bold action in a timorous world. "Invitation," Garth added slowly, as no answer came, "withdrawn." But, when the man now gave a sort of groan of amazement, Garth added further, "*pro tem.*"

The man suddenly put on a different tone; he made a fresh start; he sounded rather like a youth accosting the distinguished father of a school friend. "Is your name Garth, Sir?"

"Yes."

"Mine's Follett."

Garth pointed to the big ill-favoured house across the stream. "Any relation?" he asked.

"The only begetter, Sir, of this masterpiece."

Garth had heard of an only son of Lord Follett's, a great cricketer once but long gone to the bad and kept out of sight by making him call for an allowance every month at a bank in New Zealand. "Did I seem," said Garth, "to question your right to any portion of this seat? I apologise."

"It's I should do that, I suppose," Follett said. "At least to the Guv—for not doing you in. He had a good

old down on you. He'd howl out to me, when I was at Harrow and home for the hols, to come down to the pantry —you see he was always sending the butler away for the day and then he'd soak Burgundy in the pantry. He'd give me a drink and then blither away about Hannibal and Hamilcar and the bastard I'd be if I didn't get a bit back on you. Spiteful old *crétin*."

The outlaw's voice had softened down into a lazy purr that is common among worthless people softly nurtured. Garth cut Follett short: "If you're calling at home, I can ferry you across."

"Home! And get my dole cut off! No, thanks. I'm living on the country." The swank was coming back into the creature's voice—he was always changing. Was there anything real, at all, behind all the changes?

Garth fancied there was, and he wanted to know. "That bed," he said, "is still there. Are you coming?"

Like a town sparrow, whose whole life is a panic, the outcast seemed to peer all around for a moment before daring to pick up this chance crumb of charity. "I don't mind if I do," he said warily. No overt snare had presented itself.

IV

They rose and walked on towards the ferry. The witching hour had struck, some time before; on Gistleham Church, the big clock had darkened its face for the night and muted its tongue.

In the intensified silence Garth felt as if he could almost hear the thoughts that probably passed through the mind of the poor devil beside him. Were they not these—"Now's your opening. Fetch him one on the point of the chin—knock him out and then you can go over his pockets." "No. He's playing the game: so I must." "Mushy rot! Take a chance when you get it. Pitch him into the river

—and then go to the Guv and get taken back and eat fatted calf." "No, he's decent. He lets me walk right alongside. Just six inches nearer and I could get in a swing with my right, full on his mug, while I walk." Garth drew in, half a foot nearer to Follett. So they walked to where the punt lay chained to a great rusty mooring-ring beside the timber steps of the ferry, slippery with a green nap of waterweeds and slime.

"Sit in the bows, will you," said Garth. The forward rise in the floor of the punt was usually cleaner than the rise aft. That was all he had thought of, before speaking. He took his own stand amidship, ferryman-fashion, to pole the punt over. And only then it came to him that he had made a slip. He would now be facing forward while they crossed. His eyes would be on Follett. It was as if he had stowed Follett for'ard so as to watch him. Better have stowed him aft and so trusted visibly in the tattered rag of schoolboy honour which Garth believed he still saw flying over the wreck of this poor Reuben's manhood. At any sign that he was trusted, the sorry little flag had seemed to Garth to take life and stream out a little and then again to fall lifeless and go out of sight.

So it was now. Garth was hardly surprised when Follett stood up in mid-stream and pulled out a quite real revolver. "This bloody rot's got to end," he said. "See?" His first blackguard tone had come back in such strength as it had.

Garth ceased working; he grounded the point of his pole and held the punt up to the stream with one hand.

Follett almost screamed, "No bloody tricks with that pole, or I'll shoot."

Garth shipped the pole. The punt drifted downstream.

"Got any money on you?" Follett demanded.

"Quite a good deal," said Garth. His voice was almost

gay with that gleeful sense of having something only physical and simple to encounter.

"Ticker?" Follett blustered.

"Rather a good one," said Garth.

"Out with 'em—out on the floor, in front of you. Then you'll go overboard—swim for it—see? Bloody swine!" Like a shrew who works herself up to fight, the neurotic waster lathered up his resolution with words of abuse. He kept his tongue going as if he feared something might fail in him if it stopped for an instant.

At the first of the squall Garth had braced a foot tightly into the right angle between each side of the punt and the floor. He had every leg muscle clenched. This fastened him tightly into his place; he was built into the punt like a mast; he could not lose balance. With no visible movement of his body he now threw his whole weight first on to his right and then on to his left foot. The punt gave a sudden and violent roll from side to side, and the big figure standing in its bows was shaken overboard at the first instant of the convulsion. The splash of Follett's entry into the water cut short brusquely the last of several hysterical repetitions of the formula, "It's you or I, you lousy swine! You or I!"

Garth had not wholly meant to give Follett that ducking. He had only risked giving it. Garth would have been content to tumble the rotter down on the floor of the punt and then fall to work on him there and disarm him. Still, you can't always measure out with absolute precision the proper dose for sick souls. Besides, patient man as he was, Garth had grown angry. What on earth could one do with a creature whose moods were so helplessly discontinuous as Follett's? Dogs were not like that. And who, as Macbeth asked, can be wise, amazed, temperate and furious, all in a moment?

The anger subsided in Garth as he took up the punt-pole and dropped down the stream. He would just make sure the rat could swim, like other rats; then he would leave it to shift for itself.

It was as well for Follett that Garth took this precaution. For Follett was now only a black patch adrift on the rather less black water. When Garth reached the patch he found that the only emergent part of Follett was the middle of his back, where all the air that had been inside his clothes had collected into one leaky balloon of cloth. The head, legs and arms hung down under water, at each end of this floating patch, like those of a dead hare held by the back of its waist.

"Fainted!" thought Garth, with a touch of contempt. To set out to rob with the high hand, and then faint at a dip in cold water! Old Jowett at Oxford was right—most of the failures failed through never learning to form a sane estimate of their own powers. Still, the stubborn equity of Garth allowed, while he laboriously lugged the soused scallywag over the gunwale of the punt, that there had been a kind of measly pluck in Follett's last bluff. After all, the crock had made his little effort to come the sturdy bully over a well-nourished stranger. "For all he knew," Garth fairly conceded, "I might have been the heavy-weight champion of England."

Then things had to be done for the inanimate one—water squeezed out of him first, and then his breathing restarted by skilful violence. Somehow the doing of things for people tends to make you feel some regard for them. All Garth's anger was gone by the time Follett began to splutter and mumble a little and left Garth free to punt the half-mile upstream that they had drifted down from the ferry. Follett, full length on the floor-boards, showed little in the darkness but a white upturned face, like some queer Lady of Shalott approaching Camelot by water—so Garth thought and then

felt rather clement towards the poor wretch whom he thus saw as a guy in a burlesque. So Garth used his strength gently in helping the drooping creature ashore and across the Chantry lawn to the house.

The prodigal who thus came, not exactly home, but next door, looked, under lamplight, rather like a big statue of Famine, its face of white chalk. His soaked trousers clung to his legs, bringing out well the shapes of the bones and the absence of calf. The upper part of the nose and also the eye-sockets looked anatomical, somehow. "And he played for Middlesex once!" Garth thought as he noted how little tissue would have to shrivel or rot in order to leave just a skull, with the proper grin of a skull.

Garth hunted out a suit of pyjamas and helped the starveling to bed. There, when given some fruit and a little wine, Follett became, in an instant, fantastically grateful, then cried, and then, almost as suddenly, fell fast asleep, with a quiet sigh and collapse into felicity, like a baby.

Garth bent over the face that sleep had simplified; now that effort and thought were smoothed out, it looked young and rather ingenuous and not a bit corrupt; indeed, just a little like Auberon's as it was when Garth had stolen in to see him asleep on his last night at home. What a cropper a man might come in his youth without having much wrong with his soul! A few rotten friends, a bad patch in a house at a school—that was enough, and for all the rest of their one innings on earth they were left "wondering at themselves like men betrayed." And now Bron had got under way on the course from which a poor devil like Follett came out what he was.

V

Follett's wet clothes stank. Clothes do when you have lived in them, for several years, upon the husks that the swine do eat. They were dripping dirty drops now from a

chair to the floor. But Garth knew of a sluggish furnace that burned eternally in a brick-lined pit near the greenhouse, as in a Temple of Vesta. Follett's clothes could dry there. Garth took them across the garden and left them steaming in peace. Then he came up into the clean air of the garden.

Night's candles, such as they had been, were beginning to burn low. Dawn would break in an hour, but the world lay out dead still, as yet, as if its blood and colour had ebbed inwards, like those of other sleepers, towards some invisible and recondite heart.

Garth walked about as though there were something he still had to do. But at first he could not tell what. Go to bed? No, it was not worth while, for what was left of the night. Nor was he tired; at forty-seven a man, though no longer a racer, may be at his maximum of robustness and feel neither youth's nor old age's exorbitant lust for converse with the bed-clothes. Besides, Garth had lived, during the night that was now blenching away into the past—really lived; things had fallen to him to do, just because they and nothing else had to be done. That was life, the real thing, and his heart was astir with it, as it had often been in the old and good times. And yet he was walking about, looking for something.

Quite suddenly, as if some one had come close and told him, he knew what it was. He was wanting to tell his wife about the night's little humours and thrills, and he was walking about as if she were now asleep in the house and he was not able to tell her till day. It often came to him in that way, as if it were news, that she was dead and that all there was of her now was her Bron, the small vessel that she had laden with so many hopes. What if the dead *could* see what the living were doing? Would she see the boy waking up now in a "dorm" full of infectious

rotters, to do another day's drifting towards failure like Follett's?

Garth had stopped dead when the news came, and there he stood till the lamp no longer showed in the hall; a sunless morning was breaking, blank and aghast, as he entered the house. He went straight to his study.

VI

When the gift of speech had begun to descend on the infant Auberon, Winifred Garth had bought a little sixpenny notebook, with a shiny black cover: in this her husband and she had written down some of the marvellous things which Bron, like other first-born children, was constantly saying. After his wife's death Garth had posted up the log for a while. Then it had ceased. He now unlocked a drawer of his writing-table and took out the book; he brought it across to the window and drew a curtain for the cold light to show up the fading ink. He could read there.

Here was a note written, in Winifred's hand, the day that Bron had been possessed with rapture and had capered and whirled round the gardener's bonfire of rubbish. That was a great day. The wind had bent a few little emergent flames close down over the crown of the brown pile of leaves and dead flowers and then Bron had cried out, in a fine frenzy, "Horse pulling back wif his ears!" Next moment, more of the dampish stuff had been thrown on the pile; all but a little jet or two of visible internal flame had been quenched in smoke, and Bron had soliloquised, in a more sombre ecstasy, "Smoke is the old lion's bweath in his cave, and the flames are his eyes." Then Molly and Bron had made the ends of sticks red-hot in the fire and thrown them up against the blank stable wall as high as they could, to make the sparks fly off and scatter. "Suns bweaking and falling," Bron had said to himself, in a kind

of doating amaze, at a good burst of sparks. Winifred had put it all down.

He looked on to the next note of hers. "April 30, 1895. To-night, when Bron had been bathed and was in his pyjamas for bed, he spied the daffodils in the garden swinging about in the wind—they had grown bright after sunset, the way these yellow flowers do. He gazed at them quite a long time and then said to himself, 'Lamps o' blooty!' (beauty, he meant), over and over again, seriously and happily, just doating on them." Garth remembered the ache he had felt when he heard that. Could nothing be done to guard that infant power of seeing visions at the instance of quite common things? The two had resolved they would try. They would find means to arm their child against the coming of the despoilers, the "educators" who quenched with their perpetual jets of dead tradition and routine the delighted spirit of youth? Little had come of it all. And what lifeless rubbish might Bron not be learning to-day—to put in place of the fire and music and force of his first natural speech? No doubt the usual dull jargon of minds half-dead, the stuff that was imposed on any living wits among the young lest the half-dead be put out of countenance. And the end of it all—? Perhaps to become a mere rat in the granary, like the poor devil upstairs.

Amidst the undusted furniture of yesterday, Garth raked the ashes of those old straw fires of delight and hope while the dismal dawn stripped night of its illusive vesture of enigma. The early housemaid who came to put the room to rights for the day found Garth there at the window and shrank back with a little cry, as if she had seen something grisly. But he was perfectly dry-eyed and quite stiff in the lip. There was nothing wrong with his voice when he reassuringly bade her come in. He went off to the cold bath that is so cold after these snowy-white nights.

At his solitary breakfast a letter was waiting beside his plate:

DEAR FAVS—

I hope you are quite well. I am. We played Cringle Grange on Wednesday. Lost—17 points to 10. Buck major gave an absolutely top-hole display. He got a try for us after a run of ⅞ the length of the field. The XV. has played 3 matches this term; won 1, lost 1, drawn 1. Average points: for, 7·333 recurring; against, 13·666 recurring. Buck major's average score, in tries, 1·333 recurring. With love to Bert and all human beings and beasties at home,

Your loving

AUBERON.

Only two months at school and he was already planed down to that. What would be left of him after eight years?

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER VII

I

BRON'S preparatory school was perched on a turfy chalk down, above white Channel cliffs. Brusque south-west winds were nearly always whistling healthfully among its red chimneys; and this jollity in the air was matched by the high-pitched breeziness of the way the masters had with the boys. They fraternised and ragged and chaffed; they laboured to have no pedantic nonsense about them; they jovially took it for granted that "work" was what every manly boy hated, and every sane master, too, in his heart; it was the common enemy; still, with all these rotten examinations about, a little work had to be done; terms must be made with the beast. That was the tone of the place.

It was new to Bron. In his sight "work" had not lost, up to now, the glamour of a thing that gardeners and ferrymen kept for themselves and would seldom share with small boys who were perfectly sure they could do it all right. He was so green that a new lesson had seemed like a kind of new wild to explore. So he was soon in trouble. At supper, his very first night, a malign fate led him on to avow what fun it had been to find out about the old stakes stuck in the river at home, to prod the Romans in the tummy. A chill seemed to fall on his hearers. Claude Barbason, already a second-year boy in the place, scowled at Bron across the table. "Mind," he admonished him later, when they were alone, "you keep off that tripe about Cæsar. Unless," Claude added, "you *want* people to bar you."

No: Bron didn't. He was a sociable body. He did, as he fairly confessed to Claude, feel a lovely sort of cold wave, a kind of cool stroking, pass across his face whenever he

closed his eyes and seemed to see the old soldiers thresh through the ford, and hear the splashing and the rough shouts. But Claude was making no terms with evil. Auberon must keep off tripe.

The sinner tried his hardest to find the great affray and all its combatants dull, instead of exciting. It did not come easy. Right and wrong in these things seemed a queer sort of business. Still, there was one jolly good way out of all worries. This was to let yourself go like fury, at some game, especially "Rugger." As long as the game lasted, you didn't have to guess what you might safely say, and what you ought to keep dark: you just let yourself fling—every bit of you; and then you felt as if you could break the world, and a great peace came.

To his joy, no one pronounced this pleasure to be wicked. Indeed, strangely much the opposite. Masters said amazing things. "Garth has courage," he chanced to hear one of them say, after a match. "Yes," the other agreed. "A lion-hearted little forward." Queer! Didn't they know? As if the whole game were not for fun! As if there were anything in it that any one could be afraid of!

Still he was always apt to believe that some one else must know better than he. Other people's minds were so trenchant; they saw so clearly that they had got hold of the right end of the stick! And then the way their disdain could scorch up one's own random notions!—make them all look hugger-mugger and dull in one's own sight, although they had seemed quite interesting and jolly two minutes ago. So he loyally tried to work himself round into school ways of thinking and talking. He was no wilful kicker or jibber.

At the end of the first term he was met by his father at Gistleham station. Perhaps the father was nervously careful: boys were said to hate being kissed on platforms; Garth did not risk it. And then perhaps the coldness so carefully

assumed disconcerted the boy too and made him nervous and careful in turn and anxious to say the right thing. At any rate he rattled away, as hard as he could, in the dialect that had seemed to be felt by everybody at school to be the right thing. He explained how the school's "simply magnificent" scrum half was leaving next term—this would be "rather a fag"; and how on the last night of the term they had all gone to bed early, and this had been "distinctly a fag"; and how Bron had lost half his sweets in the train—which was "a horrible fag."

The elder Garth listened as men do to bad news that they have expected. Yes, that was what all Bron's native wood-notes were to end in. No doubt that was his thought. He had arranged for the boy to have his brain deflowered like others, and now the process was going on well.

II

In the fifteenth year of Bron's age, and his first at a great public school, his form were set to write an essay on "Rivers." Bron's ears pricked at the word. His prep-school had taught him some caution; still, here was a chance; one river, at least, he did know a little about.

He took a long time to the job. What he produced in the end was a rather confidential document, so intimate were its remarks on the enchanting private habits of his beloved Thames—about the flinty sand floating off on hot days; and the way changes came from time to time in the unseen bed of the river, as you could tell if you always felt about with your feet when you bathed, or noticed where you had to fix your float when bottom-fishing; and how a side stream coming into the bigger one edged the main channel of the big stream farther and farther over till it ate into the bank on the opposite side; and the way the stream did not really flow straight down its course, but bumped

along from side to side, hitting one bank and rebounding off on to the other, and so back again; and how you could drift almost all the way up a river, up-stream, if only you watched all the currents and nipped neatly across from the head of one little coastal eddy into the tail of another, and so on. With care so extreme as to induce heavy perspiration Bron fashioned his account of these and other tricks and traits of the Thames for presentation to the world. His fear was lest every one else should know them all so well that his stuff would seem trite.

A fine sturdy humorist was Mr. Chaytor-Tonge, his form master, as well as a fair reproduction, externally, of Holbein's Henry VIII. His fair round belly and red jowl quaked like a top-heavy jelly with honest amusement while he read parts of Auberon's screed aloud to the form, with facetious running comments. Chaytor-Tonge was in great form that morning. Garth, he said, must have seen a drunken man in a walled lane, bumping about from side to side, and mistaken him for a river; Garth should look a little closer next time he thought he saw a little river knock a big one out of its way, or a stone going out for a swim; Garth really ought to write a book, "How rivers flow up-stream." Oh, it was great fun for the Middle Fourth Form.

When the quiverful of darts had been duly stuck into Auberon, serious business began. Colin March was rather a light of the form at that era. Colin had taken Chaytor-Tonge's measure, and that gracious pastor now proceeded to read out Colin's essay, just to show the weaklings of the flock the way to go about it. This masterpiece was studded thickly with bright quotations about the yellow Tiber, the blue Danube, the golden Tagus, the arrowy Rhone and the shadowy Styx. As Chaytor-Tonge was great on patriotism, Colin had curled the tip of the tail of his composition with a

really topping final tag about the world-supremacy of the Thames—

> Though deep, yet clear; though gentle, yet not dull;
> Strong, without rage; without o'erflowing, full.

"There's the real Thames for you, Garth," the admiring reader appended.

Auberon had been feeling as a Chinese malefactor may have felt when the proper authority took a firm hold of one end of his intestines and wound them off on a roller, slowly. He could not disown sights his eyes had seen. But a master must know. Somehow, a master must know.

Colin denied it. Any fool less fat than old Tongs, he said that night in the stuffy privacy of the study that he and Auberon shared, would have seen in a jiff that Auberon's screed was the only one not absolute bilge. Colin boasted his own to have been the toshiest bleat of them all.

As to that, Auberon differed. "You had a lot of frightful good quotes. You must know half the books that there are."

Colin hooted. "You don't fancy I've read 'em? With all the time I need for higher things! See—all that matters, in books, is the tiny bits that everybody quotes some time or other. And those all come in at your ears, in God's good time, if you'll wait and not read. 'Tout vient à fin, à qui sait attendre.' That's one of 'em. You only have to let 'em in; then they're ready for slinging at Tongs. It's a labour-saving appliance."

It seemed a good, wise plan. Auberon had seldom opened a book when a row or a swim or a sail or a ride was to be had. Still, he had lit, now and then, on some little scrap of stuff, in a book, that had excited him tumultuously.

> But the lark's shrill fife may come
> At the daybreak from the fallow,
> And the bittern sound his drum,
> Booming from the sedgy shallow

Such things had to be repeated, over and over, hundreds of times, the thrill of them making him get up and walk about restlessly, longing to do something, Heaven knew what. Yet Colin's plan seemed to be wise.

"Want another good tip?" Colin resumed sagely. "Look after your adjectives first. The jus' so adjective is what Tongs wants. Gold is red, Buccleuchs is bold, taste is execrable, villagers is apple-faced, Tiber is yellow."

That seemed a sound notion too. Bron took shame to himself for having never thought of that. Still, who could expect to be as brilliant as Colin—except, of course, the incomparable Victor?

III

To homespun wits, like Bron's, Colin was certainly a dazzler. In that, he was a true son of his house. Three generations ago the clan of March was first heard of. Ever since then it had abounded in marketable talent, diplomatic, social, even artistic. A March had written notorious novels, successes of scandal, that lived as hard and about as long as super-impudent ball-dresses. "Naphtha lamps on a booth at a fair" these works were called by Victor, now a brilliant figure in the Sixth and great on keeping up Parnassian standards. "Absolutely," Colin had said complacently, on hearing of this valuation.

During seventy years of cabotinage and bravura the Marches had picked up a peerage, a good deal of money, though less than they spent, and a good-humoured contempt for the more ancient and less vivid patriciate—the helpless old world of good breeding and dullness that was now crumbling before the assaults of the vulgar. Democracy had covered the face of the earth and nothing was left to choice spirits now beyond the grotesque adventure of keeping afloat, every man for himself, in that comic ocean of roughs, clowns and cheap-jacks.

Every March is a humorist and a skilled valuer. Houses and diamonds, racy human traits and humours, the art of gaunt Italian Primitives, the corruptibility of a politician or a woman, the lustre of lives of ungarlanded toil or lofty refusal—any March can appraise all of these with the delighted eye of a keen collector. Perhaps that was why Colin liked Auberon. Auberon's impracticable little fad of saying just what he thought must have tickled the born connoisseur of quaint things. "But, bless your heart," Colin admonished him now, "it ain't business. No demand for it. 'Member the time you said that all the little different emphasising particles in Greek meant what an English workman means by 'bloody'? Bible truth, absolutely. But Tongs only raged. Same when you said that in Latin *ille* meant 'that,' and *iste* 'that 'ere.' Tongs raged again—he couldn't stand it: much too true for him—too beastly true to be safe—made him feel you might say any damn thing next. Not business, sonny."

There might be something in that. Auberon weighed it. Everything was very difficult. If you said what you thought, you got put in the stocks, to be jeered at. It looked as if the sound line were to try to get things to strike you, not as they did, but in some other way—more like the way they seemed to strike every one else. But how the deuce to do it?

He went so far at last as to broach the matter to Jinks, his house tutor. Jinks was young and jolly; Auberon liked having tea alone with him. Flown with that generous fluid and with affection for Jinks, Auberon took heart and started his confessions.

The smile of hospitality faded from the round red face of the chosen father confessor. Introspection! Good Lord! In this little lump of health too! Jinks made a rush to say something vaguely calming, as doctors do when they guess

you have caught a bad germ but can't yet say which one it is. "Just you throw yourself into the life of the house, old son, for all that you're worth," said Jinks. "You'll soon work through all that distemper. Take it from me. More cake?"

Auberon took it, all right, as far as he could. He wanted to take it. Of course his confessing had not gone very far before it was so brusquely stopped. That was always the way: before he could get his points properly put, in a talk, the other person was getting out his, and doing it so well that Auberon could only hold his tongue and admire. So he took more tea-cake and tried to cast away care: there was always the darling refuge of bodily effort—the sweeping drive of an oar, held out to the end; the heave of happy muscles straining away to the heart's content, obscure in the depths of the scrum: that was utter freedom and peace. Besides, there were wonderful good little talks, now and then, with Horace Fulford, the "new" cricket pro, a marvellous man, simply tremendous.

IV

Fulford, you should understand, was only new as compared with "Old Tyke," his monumental predecessor. Fulford had come for the first weeks of May as a stop-gap three years ago, and he had been stopping the gap ever since, to everybody's intense satisfaction. People said he had played for New Zealand. He told you how to do things in a way that made it seem as easy to do them as if your whole body and limbs were turned into putty and you could shape and twist them just as you liked. He could coach at footer and rowing just as well, the swells said, as at cricket. It felt as if the dayspring from on high had visited Auberon personally when Fulford went out of the way to speak to him after a junior house match. Auberon had felt he was

playing harder in that match than ever before. Fulford only said, "If you keep it like that, you'll do." But, the moment he said it, Auberon had felt that now he could go on from that point of hardness to playing harder next time.

Another day Auberon, stroke in a junior house four, was rowing a trial course, with Fulford coaching from the bank. "Now then, stroke, none of that spurting!" Fulford sang out when Auberon began, towards the end of the course, to try to satisfy the public demand for such "gallant and repeated spurts" as adorn most newspaper accounts of boat-races.

"Sorry to snub a stout effort," Fulford said in private, later, "but never hurry a crew that's falling to bits with flurry already. Of course people will gush about *you* if you do. But you'll let your crew down."

Auberon's face burned with shame in the dusk—they were walking back late to school from the boats. Why, he had known all the time that a good half of the old spurting stunt was show-off—at least it would be in himself—greedy show-off at the expense of his crew. He took his gruel silently now, and when the race came off he rowed it like an honest general, racing sharply for the lead and then steadying down to ease his men and lengthening out for all he was worth and rowing home quite unsensationally, lengths ahead of a crew whose frantic attempts at a quicker stroke were drawing hysterical applause from masters and boys.

"A somewhat stolid stroke, yours—eh?" Chaytor-Tonge said to Jinks, at the finish. Chaytor-Tonge's house had lost.

"He *was* a bit lifeless," Jinks admitted. "Still, the crew were good old trusties. They pulled him through. But *your* stroke was the man of the race."

Fulford said to Auberon, "Good work! I guess that's how your father rowed his races."

Fulford had said things like that more than once; it was

the last word of praise, from his mouth, that the elder Garth would have done a thing so. When Colin overheard the pro commending something to Auberon in these terms he eulogised Fulford's piety. "All people that on earth do dwell," said Colin, "should praise their creators with cheerful voice. And I'm told your Guv created Fulford, as chief cricket man here."

"Dunno," said Auberon. "Only know that Fulford was sick in the San all my first hols from my prep-school."

"The San?"

"The room my father puts men in—the ones he picks up when he's out."

"Visitors?"

"Well, the visitors whose clothes are full of beasties," Auberon explained.

Colin was hugely diverted. "The Chantry dry-dock, for tramp ships to refit in! I see. And then the reformed down-and-out turns up in this place, chit in hand, and tells them your father says, please will they give him a job?"

Colin mused joyously. He was always elated by any scent of intrigue, real or fancied. "Is it true," he presently asked, "that your father's unsurpassable butler was first taken on because he had just come out of quod and couldn't hope for a job anywhere else?"

"Dunno," said Auberon, astonished. "Who told you?"

"A gossiping world," Colin purred. "And that aged cook at the Chantry? Hasn't she got some glorious past? Arson, is it? Or coining? Or just simple looting?"

Auberon stared. "How the deuce——?"

"Oh, it's a wicked world," said Colin. "So the practical question is—what has friend Fulford done? Murder? Too many aces? Too many wives? Consider the evidence. Your father is notorious for having the regal power of 'touching for' the King's Evil (moral variety). Makes

each patient instantly whole and simultaneously finds him a job. Fulford, a palpable sahib, comes to your house with his clo' full of bugs. Your father feeds him up and makes certain passes over him with his hands, and Fulford is reborn and comes to Chellingham a pukka *preux chevalier* who makes the common Chellingham beak look like a billiard-marker. Question is—what's his crime? Why did he feed on the husks? Why cricket pro and not some genteel occupation, as the world counts? A mystery, my dear sir. I dedicate all my powers to unravelling it."

V

That was rubbish, of course. Colin was no dedicator of all his powers to anything. Still, it was 'cute of him, so Auberon felt, to have guessed so much more than he, Auberon, had ever thought of. And now, if Fulford had really run rather wild, long ago, and Auberon's father had taken a bit of a risk in putting him up for his job at the school, then clearly his father might like to hear what a tremendous success Fulford was. Auberon vowed that this week, when he wrote home, he would go far, far beyond his usual list of what other boys seemed to regard as the chief public events of the day. He would even make a clean breast, to his father, of that confidential affair which Jinks had bundled out of sight the moment Auberon had let the tip of its tail out of the bag.

For this gigantic feat of ice-breaking Auberon chose an evening when Colin had some mysterious business in hand, away from their study. The letter started all right: " Dear Father, I hope you are quite well I am." All his letters home, for more than three years, had opened with that. But then came the trouble. Better, perhaps, not plunge abruptly into the novel topics—one ought to glide into things tactfully. So he continued to touch, for a while, on

public affairs. "To-day the XV. lost to Marlborough. They got 11 points to our 3—a topping try. Bellingham got it." That was what people would probably want to hear about. Masters had left the field with their shoulders bowed, after the match. Chaytor-Tonge was said to have wept. No doubt adults, as a body, were moved by similar passions, though Auberon, in his secret heart, had a shamefaced way of seeing no more in a game than the greatest of good fun; he simply couldn't sorrow much over results.

But now he must work into his theme. "On Wednesday," he craftily wrote, "we played our tie with Godley's in the Junior House Cup (second round). We won (27 points to 3). I played a pretty rotten game, but had some luck and got three of our tries." Now we were getting on. Nothing needed now but just to slip in a sort of "As we *are* talking of me, by the way——" and so glide softly into the heart of the matter.

But, Gosh! it was difficult. Writing about one's own old fixes and messes seemed curiously measly as soon as one tried to do it. And once, long ago, his father had said that "a man should not speak of himself, except when compelled." He pictured his father opening this letter and liking to hear about the Marlborough match and then liking decidedly less that swanking, dragged-in mention of Auberon's tries, and then his face growing grim over the fussy self-regarding stuff now about to be added. No, men shouldn't speak about themselves! But not even to their fathers? Oh, everything was very difficult! Auberon still hung uncertain, his wet pen dangling from his hand, when Colin burst into the study, all radiant.

It seemed that Colin had just reconnoitred a new line of ascent to the roof of the house. Just one good step out from the sill of Bolitho's study window and then you got yourself

jammed in the right-angled corner between the two walls, with your back against the big downcomer pipe and your feet against the opposite wall. Thence a strong man could "back up," inch by inch, wriggling up his back and feet by turns, to just under the roof, but there it would want a whacking long reach to stretch out round the eave and get hold of the gutter-pipe above, so as to let go with your back and feet, swing out free, and hoist yourself up with your arms on to the roof. Clearly a case for a hefty gorilla like Auberon.

Oh, sweets of action! How all meditation, confession, communion pale their ineffectual fires at the rising of that irresistible sun! "The nobleness of life is to do this." Yes, to *do* anything that can be done with a will.

"One second," Auberon said. He wrote swiftly on: "With love to all humans and beasties, your loving son, Bron." In five minutes more he was precariously perched in the leaden gutter of the roof, stretching down one of his notoriously long arms to haul Bolitho, the second member of the climbing party, over the *mauvais pas* at the eave.

So Thomas Garth got nothing out of the way to read at his breakfast next morning: only the same old letter, in substance, that he had received once a week, during term, for more than three years—about as filling a meal for a lonely man's affection as a collation of sawdust would be for an equally hungry body.

CHAPTER VIII

I

FOR many years the day that reunited Molly and Bron at the end of each term was always spent in much the same way. Molly would have come from Fifeshire by a night train and Bron would have risen at dawn—or, in winter, long before it—to catch the earliest of all trains from Chellingham, lest a single available hour of home and Molly be lost. So they would both be at the Chantry about ten in the morning.

There they would swiftly change into clothes that "didn't mind tearing" and sally forth to retake possession of all that was immemorially theirs. Everything was done in a regular order. First they would visit the nests of the magpies in the top boughs of the beech and make sure that the herons still came to feed at Misery Point and that the brown owls still abode in the big holly and in the big yew. After the mid-day meal they would have out the Chantry punt and slowly and luxuriously resume enjoyment of Retally Slack, the half-mile of shallow backwater lying between the mainland on the Chantry side and the osiered and forested Gistleham Ait. So far, they knew what they were doing. No doubt a less conscious part of their business and desires was for each to make sure that the other was still the same good old partner as ever.

The last of Molly's night journeys from Scotland was made when Auberon's age was sixteen and a half. No more school for Molly. She was to work at home with a coach till next autumn, and then go to Cambridge. Christmas was near, and the two of them prosecuted their fond re-conquest of Retally Slack on a veritable English winter afternoon—sunless, windless, humid and soothingly grey, one of the days that engendered fox-hunting and football as

well as English roses and June verdure. The tide was out; the fairway of the Slack was now only a chain of pools nearly stagnant, almost cut off from each other by natural sills or bars of gravel: over each of these little weirs a shallow overflow of water, from the pool above, lipped weakly.

Up over each sill in turn the two drove the punt. In their watermanship together they seldom concerted a joint movement consciously and never discussed one; they worked like the right and left sides of a body, carrying out the orders of its one twin-lobed brain. Now and then, when the punt rode easy in a pool, this silent community of impulse would cause them to knock off work and sit down, each at one end of the craft, and exchange a few words absurdly inadequate to the momentousness of the occasion.

"Glad," said Bron, at one of these halts, "there's no lock lower down."

"Rather!" Molly agreed. Whatever was, was good just now. "Why, though, 'spesh'ly?" Certain words, as pronounced by Bron in tenderer years, remained in use between the two as a kind of private dialect.

"We shouldn't see the mud if there was," he said. He looked out doatingly over the wide tracts of greenish-black slime that sloped gently up, on each side, from the edges of the pools to the camp-shedded banks of the Ait and of the Gistleham shore.

"Some people," said Molly, "say our mud's beastly."

Bron's congenital tolerance tried, for a few silent moments, to find some grain of sense in this fantastic opinion. None presenting itself, he said with conviction, "Idiots! When mud squelches up between your toes, you're like a cat being stroked. Besides, mud's different from the gravelly parts. I like things to be different."

Molly considered this while they urged the punt over the

next trickly sill and the next and the next. In the glassy lagoon above these they easied again and squatted as before, each on one sloping end of the punt. The mild winter evening was just beginning to muffle them in with pale wrappings of cobwebby mist that seemed to hush the visible scene like some muted sound. Nothing moved: overhead the elms and huge Turkey oaks that filled the upper end of the Ait were like people holding their breath; the sky-line of Gistleham village had begun to blur itself softly; day noises failed and the tranquil whistle of some man at work by himself in a barge-builder's yard rose clearer and more melodious; a first light came blinking meekly out in a window high up in the goodly abode, farther up-stream, where the greatest of the Folletts, the Regency statesman and buck, used to assemble fiddlers and roses and palms and kiss his leman and drink deep. It was a nunnery now: female orphans were trained by icy Sisters to wash dirty linen and iron it in the famous saloons of the mode of Louis Quatorze. Under the bank of the Ait the last of the gaily bedecked pleasure barges of London City's old livery companies lay aground, slowly breaking her back on an uneven bed of mud—a sort of Fighting Temeraire of jollity towed long ago to her last berth, there to moulder. But, luckily, no possible array of emblems of the sureness of joy's consignment to dust comes to much more, in the eyes of untried youth, than a few extra touches of charm in some likable landscape. No shadow was thrown on Bron's and Molly's beatitude.

II

The two could leave a good long gap in any of their private talks and then go on again from where they had stopped, as if no gap had come. Such a gap occurred now; and, while their silence went on, the listening stillness of the delectable place and the witching hour so worked upon Bron

that all decent reserve within him gave way. From saying what he had about the jolly variousness of things he plunged on now to impart to Molly what simply could not be breathed in the great world of school—how he liked simply everything—liked it so much that at times he abs'utely couldn't keep still and had to jump about, unobserved, and grin and chuckle and make faces. "Just think," he said, "of all the feels that things give you—the feel of your tennis-shoes on pavements—taking hold of it, 'spite of its flatness. And then the hardy, snorty smell of outdoors before breakfast. And meals—all 'strord'na'ly different, like people's faces. And days—Monday, a grim, bony sort of day, and Tuesday nothing special—just a bit of 'playing through the green,' and Wednesday skinny but nice, and Thursday plain and fat and heavy, and Friday just a little bit like father, and Saturday marv'ously friendly. And names of months—the way they excite you, like pictures, with thinking about some topping sort of weather—the way a light will be thrown up on the ceiling some morning when you wake and snow has come in the night—or the sun in the evening peering in at your window just for a few weeks in the summer, though it looks north. April! August! October! Delic'ous!"

His voice hugged and fondled the words as if they were soft furry animals. Molly, sitting aft in her blue and red gym-dress, faded and shrunken with many accidental and other immersions in the Thames, listened with friendly eagerness—more, perhaps, than complete understanding.

"Just think of *beds*!" Bron rhapsodised. There was no stopping now; he was launched; he had to go through with the queer wordy job of unpacking the crammed portmanteau he had within him. "All their 'stror'n'y tweaky cunning — the hotness there is in the blankets, and then sheets to make a little quiet coolness, just enough to filter the

hotness! And then the gorgeous tucking-in dodge to make a warm hole like a tiny yacht's cabin, with coldness outside and scrunchy lumps of ice floating down-stream, biffing into each other and making a grinding noise! And houses!—topping dodges houses are, the way they let you come a few inches off from fearful cold winds and rain, so you can hear them whiffling and smelling about, the other side of a wall, trying to get you, and you puffickly safe! When it's stormy at night I often squiggle about in bed with joy, it's so *fine* to have a house. Besides, the spiffing notion of bringing a *very* outdoory thing, like a fire, right indoors and having crafty contraptions for not letting it burn your things or the smoke stufflocate you!" For a moment or two he had to pause and revel silently in contemplation of this ravishing vision. "Tremendrous!" he added, after his trance of beatitude. The old dialect had, between them, the force of a parenthetic note, "Of course all this is unspeakably private."

Molly can scarcely have quite understood. What was Bron, that he should be able, after six years of numbing education, to tell her what all the big artists are trying, more or less vainly, to tell the rest of us? Still, she was moved and made happy: her old Bron needed her still: he still brought, to show her, his private turmoils of joy. And he was still the same touching creature as ever; unable to shine in talk like Victor, or even Colin, and yet not wary, like Claude, lest he should say things that gave him away, the plodding old taker of risks and exposer of flanks and courter of wounds made her ache with desire to arm him against the ridicule and the snubs that might come: Bron's defencelessness made him dreadfully dear. "You were always like that," she said. "You always used to think everything frightfully good. Simply everything. When you were only just able to take off your own boots you used to put them neatly together and sit down in front of them, liking them. You'd

say, 'My bootie is standing beside his friend, my other bootie.' You got fearfully happy about them."

"I remember them," Bron said. "They *were* thundering good boots."

Molly laughed, "There you go!" and Bron laughed at that; they were merry together; they let the punt drift.

"Hullo!" said Bron presently. "Houses shutting their eyes!" Through a milky film of gathering mist they could see a blind fall like an eyelid over a yellow-lit window.

"Flood, too," said Molly regretfully: why should time pass and spells end and charms be severed?

Flood it was. The infantile babble of the tiny weirs between pool and pool of the Slack had ceased; over each little sill the water had drawn itself smooth and a weak current up-stream had set in; while they had been sitting in their heaven, with time well abolished, the punt had begun to drift slowly up river on the young tide; it had cleared already the head of the Ait; now it was floating under the freakish gables and turrets of New Hall, the large and mean house that Lord Follett had built for the ease of his mind.

III

Between the high garden wall of the house and the river below it there ran, for the next quarter of a mile up-stream, a narrow public footpath, hoisted well above high-water mark. The river side of this gravelled ledge was unfenced; from its edge a little precipice of mud and rank weeds fell steeply away, in a slimy slope, to the foreshore, some twelve feet below. For the first few feet of its width the foreshore was stony and sloped gently; then it became a level expanse of deep greenish slime, which gave place to clean gravel again a few inches above low-water mark.

Gistleham drunkards homing on Saturday nights and tacking across and across this path had been known to

rebound off the wall, at the end of a landward tack, so hard that on the subsequent riverward tack they stepped right over the edge and slithered down the little cliff of mud to the foreshore beneath. In fact a rising tide had actually extinguished one of these fallen men of pleasure. Others had lain on the foreshore till the cold sting of the rising water had spurred them to the effort of self-rescue. Such incidents, and their possible fruits, were always present to the minds of the local watermen. When the river gave up its dead, a body meant half-a-crown for its finder, if found in the county owning one bank of the stream; five shillings if found on the other. So the watermen had to be on the "Qui vive?"—or the "Qui est mort?" as Victor said—to spy out any such windfalls and tow them across, if necessary, from the half-crown to the five-shilling shore before taking them out of the water.

Less secure but possibly greater profits might be made by helping the fallen but still living reveller back to the narrow path of safety. Of late, indeed, this labour of mercy had been rising from the status of fortuitous treasure-finding to that of an almost regular industry. Gistleham watermen, pinched by their usual winter unemployment, had learned to look out at certain hours on certain days for a chance of profitable salvage—so curiously does Providence cater for some of the inconsiderable sparrows whom it loves. Molly and Auberon suddenly felt the breathless stillness of the place infringed by a low, earnest voice on the shore near them: "It's 'im! 'Op orf!" It was the voice of an aged ferryman whom they knew.

"'Ush!" said another voice anxiously. "'Ark again! 'Ush!"

"Garn! 'E's stawted on the pawth a'ready. Cawn't y' 'ear 'im shoutin' the odds? An' you witin' 'ere! Yer mye be throwin' money awye."

This seemed to convince the man who had doubted. A figure that was vague-edged in the mist ran down the boarded slope from the ferryman's shelter hutch under a great tree, pushed afloat a skiff that had lain beached near the ferry-boat, jumped into her bows as she took the water, and sculled hastily away up-river, keeping close to the foreshore under the auriferous path. The ferryman, tied to his post by the possible calls of duty, spoke in tones of envy to some person invisible. "Aye. Thet's 'is lor'ship. The beauty! 'Ear 'im 'oller? Bung-full!"

Beyond doubt now, a high-pitched voice, uplifted in monologue, was emerging into clearness, somewhere away in the mist. It was a man's—a rather modish man's: the final g's were dropped and there were other fashionable vulgarisms of pronunciation, besides such maulings and telescopings of words as proclaimed that this spiller of the treasures of his mind was drunk. The high brick wall on the inland side of the path threw the voice well out towards the river, and this liquid sounding-board gave it great carrying power.

It soon appeared that the theme of this discourse was the sovereign duty of learning early how to carry your wine. Instances of failure were being adduced with little reserve: "M'poor father"; "M'worthlesh son"; "Certain cantin' neighbour 'f mine." Himself the speaker was acquitting, on the main count. "Been mish'rable sinner 'n all that—mean t'shay never pretended t'be hyp'crite—all that—all right if people only listen to me an' try t'learn carry'r wine."

The noise approached; presently a little band of advancing figures began to define themselves on the path, about a hundred yards off. The central figure was a tall silk-hatted man progressing spasmodically; his vigorous forward lurchings were qualified now and again by backward swayings and then by rapid lateral yawings or fallings-away;

as a boat edges away from side winds, the wayfarer seemed now and then to sidle away apprehensively from the heartless hardness of the brick wall on his left, of which he had already made some painful trials, and then again to edge away from the Gadarene steep of mud to which he thus approximated on his right. An advance guard of a few ragged Gistleham children preceded him: they walked like creatures involved in a beatific dream, with their heads turned back lest they should miss the least item of the diversion in hand, not to mention that always-to-be-hoped-for climax, the headlong descent of the principal character to the foreshore. A similar body of children followed, with the same absorbed enjoyment and expectancy, at the heels of the giver of this entertainment. A little farther behind, a famine-stricken tramp dogged the rear of the procession, discreetly withdrawn but ready to cut in if affairs should take any turn favourable to his interests. Below, faintly rippling the smooth, mist-tarnished water mirror with an occasional touch of his sculls, the waterman in his skiff kept precisely abreast of the moralist teaching above.

Something about this rude farce, perhaps the queer incongruity of the affront that it put on the pale nun-like quietude of the river, now hushed and musing over its vespers, held Molly and Auberon motionless and speechless, each of them for a moment a mere passive pair of amazed eyes and ears.

The hero of the pageant halted, some fifty yards off, to take breath; he leaned back against the wall, with his feet planted a little way from its base, so that he looked like a flying buttress upholding a cathedral built in some lamentable style of Gothic grotesque. From this position of relative repose he resumed his effort to preach unflinchingly the pure milk of the word: "'S what I've tol' people all m'life—keep your mouthsh shut and carr' your wine like man. No

good! No yoosh talkin'! No yoosh 't all!—Wishdom cryin' out in 'shtreets—no man lishenin'—shimply gen'ration vipersh. M'yown child—m'yown ewe son—mean t'shay m'one lamb an' heir—wouldn't lishen—shent him up m'yown b'loved 'varshity—*alma mater* 'n' all that—great sheat of learnin'—humane lettersh 'n' all that. No yoosh!—never learned to carry 'sh wine—'sh why I'm here now tryin' t'shave risin' gen'ration—shufferin' li'l children come unto me. Good ol' shayin' that! Qui' righ'!"

The orator ratified this commendation of Holy Writ with a nod so energetic that his tall hat was shaken off forwards and rolled across the narrow path, almost to its outer edge. Desiring to recover his property he pushed off from the wall with his shoulders so hard that his body not only reached but passed the vertical line upwards from his feet. So he toppled forward, took a couple of steps in the same direction in the instinctive attempt to regain balance, but fell forward still with the upper part of his body and tumbled headlong over the unguarded brink and down the little cliff of muddy clay and greenstuff. At the bottom he rolled down the gentle upper slope of the foreshore, where it was stony, and came to rest, face down and motionless, in the tract of deep and almost level slime below.

Wisdom was justified of her children. The windfall had fallen.

IV

People who are brought up on the banks of a large river do not wait and gape when accidents happen; for most river accidents transact themselves quickly; the patient may be out of sight, as well as dead, before you have overcome your honourable British reluctance to make a scene by going to his relief. So the interrupted homilist had scarcely achieved the whole of his descent before Auberon and Molly, without moving and seconding a resolution, or indeed saying a word,

were closing in on the spot where he lay, driving their punt with thrusts that made it slap the water loudly at each downward flop of its lifted bows.

There was no need. Others had started from nearer at hand. By the time the punt's bow scrunched on the gravelly foreshore, close to the recumbent figure, the hungry tramp had slid, sitting, down the mud precipice and was plunging knee-deep through the flatter filth below, to acquire merit and its rewards by lifting the stunned man's face out of the soft mud in which he was ignominiously drowning, though neither his body nor even his ears were submerged.

But the tramp himself was not first at the goal. The waterman, hovering alertly on his own element, had already driven his boat ashore with two strokes that bent his sculls like fishing-rods, had shipped them and jumped out and was rushing to head the tramp off from the prey. "Garn aht of it," he snarled, "ya bleedin' cadger! I seen yer, 'angin' rahnd. Aht of it!"

The underfed tramp fell away, frustrated and whining. "Downsher wawnt a bit of 'elp wiv 'im? Give a man a chawnce." But the man who had served his seven long years of apprenticeship to the water knew what was due to himself. Shall the bread of the children be given to dogs? "Aht of it!" he growled again, turning, bare-toothed, as if he would bite. The skinny vagrant limped off ruefully while the waterman lifted the prone body upright and scraped part of the thick mask of mud off its face with the edge of one hand.

"Yer all right, me lord," he shouted down one of the creature's ears. "Can y'ear me? Yer in good 'ands, Lord Follett. Can y'ear me? Thet's right." For the man made of mud—such he looked—had begun to splutter mud from his mouth and sneeze it from his nose.

During the few seconds occupied by this first stage of revival a high-pitched titter from a housemaid perched at a lofty bedroom window of New Hall made itself heard with curious distinctness. Then the splutter of literal mud began to be complicated with a splutter of abuse. "Blast you, don't spit in my ear. J'expect me to chat with my mouth full of sewage? Damn fool!" Perhaps the cold of the mud on Follett's forehead had partly sobered him; at any rate he was able now to lay his tongue to any foul word he wanted—even to pronounce them nearly right. The waterman turned to Molly and Auberon, whom he knew. "'E'll do all right, Miss, now," he said in a low voice. "I shouldn't wait. 'E'll start in, somethink orful, arter this. Not 'arf lenguage! I shouldn't wait, Miss Gawth."

The mud-coloured figure caught at the name. "Garth!" he screamed, furiously rubbing his eyes. "That plottin' swine! Come to cook up some more lies about me? Want another rotten son of mine to harbour, do you? Bloody kidnappin' swab!"

A violent sneeze interrupted the "lenguage." The waterman looked troubled. He had his standards and this was a scandal. "Garn aht of it, ya mangy scum!" he shouted to the lingering tramp, to drive him out of hearing. "Run orf 'ome, you boys and gells," he shouted up to the children on the path, who did not budge. "I said *Miss* Gawth, me lord," he whispered earnestly in the peer's ear. "The young lidy is 'ere."

"Lady!" shrieked the noble lord. His voice had the venomous unreserve of a frantically drunken woman when she tries to belch out, pell-mell, all the store of obscenities hoarded secretly in sober hours. "Lady!—cousin—niece—what does that stinkin' hypocrite call her?—shady little by-blow of his own—little bitch he wants my son for, I sh'pose—smuggles him into the damned house on purpose—old

procurer!—wants a blood cock for his bastard young hen. The beauty's here, is she?" The beast was visibly retching to vomit all the bestial fantasies of spite that had lain heavy and sour on his mind for years.

Auberon, though not yet seventeen, was large for his age, uncommonly strong and a good man of his hands. At the first handful of filth flung in Molly's face by the degenerate's tongue, the whole of Auberon's consciousness fused itself into one burning hunger to batter and smash the foul mouth into silence; every ounce of strength and will in him seemed to have rushed tingling into his fists till they felt like steel balls to be swung in whirling ecstasy at the ends of two cords till they got home on that frothing mad dog. He was charging headlong out of the punt, past Molly, to get at his man, when she put her good strong hand on his wrist and said "No!" He had to look in her face, which he had never seen pale in his life: now it was frightfully white, but not faint or weak, and he felt his red passion of uncontrol to be subdued by her cold contained strength. She turned him back to his place, and a thrust of her own pole sent the punt skimming away from the bank.

A swiftly thickening curtain of mist was drawn at once between the punt and the *tableau* on shore. At thirty yards distance the whole scene on land was deleted. Even the intermittent jet of scurrilities that the nobleman managed to squirt, as the waterman carried him home, soon subsided into silence. In mid-river the mist walled Bron and Molly into a little white cabin that moved as they moved; mid-river might as well have been mid-Atlantic for all they could see or hear beyond this milky chamber's soft walls.

CHAPTER IX

I

AUBERON was sick and numb, shrunken into himself with the abject collapse that follows a loss of self-mastery. But, river navigation in fog was an old game of theirs and he made the needful movements by rote, absently and ruefully: he took out of a pocket a compass and a six-inch Ordnance map, and "set" the map on the floor, amidships, where both could see it. So they punted homeward, by the chart, each conforming silently to the movements of the other.

The young tide was gathering strength; it resisted; it made their work hard — made them animate the swinging rhythm of the punt's forward plunge at each simultaneous thrust of the poles, and then of its eager short run between the strokes. That did Auberon good. Hard work was calming; it re-established you somehow; it was like seeing all the stars quiet and strong on awaking from some ugly dream. But, next thing, he remembered: "I'm a pretty egoistic beast," he thought. It was Molly, not he, that the rabid brute had bespattered. He glanced at Molly's face, and the white, remote look of it scared his eyes off her. She must be dead tired, for one thing, he thought. "Easy wanted, for me," he said, and he made as if to sit down. Weren't there things they must say? They couldn't just go on for ever, as if no smash had happened.

"No!" she said, as if she had dreaded the coming of words. "Let's get on quickly." She did not look at him nor cease work for a second.

He acquiesced, and then he wondered. Was it only Follett that had put her off? Or had he, Bron, also done something rotten, without knowing, in that fit of fury? He

easied again for a moment and said, somewhat pleadingly, "Friends?"

"Yes, of course!" she said quickly, as if he had spoken far off the point. He went back to his work.

Advancing twilight was complicating the mist. Over the wide-valleyed Thames a damp winter evening may decline almost dismayingly: everything is tucked in for the night under a coverlet somewhat too shroud-like. Only the snuggest open fires of coal or of comradeship will satisfy sociable souls at such hours, and now Bron's shivered within him. Something frightful had happened: Molly was not simply battered and bruised: she was somewhere away, out in the dark, in the wilds, wrestling alone with angels or devils and not meaning to tell Bron how she got on.

The mist was white no longer, but only a kind of turbidity added to night's natural blackness, when Auberon padlocked the punt in its low-hooded dock. As they crossed the reeking lawn to the blear-eyed house that blinked feebly out at them through the blanketing fog, Molly suddenly asked: "Did *you* know, all the time?"

"Know what?" he asked eagerly.

"Oh, don't!" she protested, as though no one now left in the world could really have any thought but one. "Why, that Mr. Fulford was that person's son."

"Son!" He slowly found a place in his mind for the notion. Why, of course—now that he came to fit in one thing with another. "Gum, no!" he said, in amazement.

She looked at him hard. He could not make out in that darkness whatever there was in her face: but a queer notion seized him that she was thinking. "Men! Men! The beasts! I've found them out to-day!" And possibly adding: "And Bron is one of them, too." He thought of all the filthily-talking fellows he knew at school. No girl, he knew, could ever be like that: girls were like Molly. And

if any girl should hear any one of those scrubs, mightn't she very well think that such talk was the regular thing among the men at a school, and wash her hands of the swine, one and all.

There was nothing to say.

II

In the hall a maid came to meet them; she seemed to be relieved by their return. Mrs. Nevin and Mr. Victor, she told Molly, had called five minutes ago and said they would wait: they were now in the drawing-room.

Molly did an unprecedented thing when she heard this: she glanced suddenly down at her jolly old clothes that "didn't mind tearing"—the knicks and short skirt, as though something had just gone wrong with them; then she said to Bron, with a rather scared look at the closed door of the drawing-room, "Will you?—please!" and rushed upstairs—to change, he supposed.

In his own muddy array he went straight, as he was bidden, to keep the great guests in play until Molly should reinforce him. No great hand at fighting these delaying battles, even at the best of times, he was less of a match than ever to-day, under his new load of care, for the bright ironic chaff of Victor. That brilliant had just been reset and repolished to great effect by his first term in the quick and nimble social air of the university of Oxford. He was gaily apologetic to Bron; he confessed he had known it was brutal of people to call on Molly—she and Bron always had to be hauled down out of the top of a forest tree if any one called, or else torn up by their roots out of the river, like two water-lilies, to wither indoors.

Presently Molly came in, and every one looked at her with a kind of wonder—even Bron, who would no more have thought of examining her face, until to-night, than of

conning his own in a looking-glass. All her perfect rightness in his sight, during his whole life, had had nothing to do with her looks. But, now that this enigmatic, estranging film was forming itself between them, he looked at her hard and anxiously, as though at some imperilled possession. And so he saw, for the first time, that she was a very beautiful person.

Had she always been so? Or had she only grown into it lately? Had this very day put the last perfecting touch of some mysterious brush to a masterpiece? Through the lamplit air, now a-buzz with Mrs. Nevin's murmurous bumble-bee-like talk, he looked and wondered.

He made no mistake. In Molly's twentieth year one or two women were able to find fault with some feature of hers, or even with that columnar sum of all power and grace, her tall figure. Too large in the mouth, they would say; too square in the shoulders; a touch of gauntness. And then the full red of the cheeks, "careless and brave," like the rose in the song, after hard games in the sun; and the swing of her arm in making a stroke—was not this Diana too wholly the puissant young huntress, too Amazonian in her rude health and Hebean bloom? But no man harboured these puny heresies—at any rate when Molly was in sight. Your critical sense was knocked out of action as she trod the ground anywhere near you: she made the June turf or the ice on a lake look more springy; she moved the strong shafts of her limbs with a noble unconscious freedom that set you thinking this must surely be the true gait of woman, lost perhaps when Eve took to mincing, and now brought back to the world. She would look at you with a straight steadiness uncommon in women as old as she was and no older, and speak with the frank seriousness of children whom nobody has yet made ashamed of being wise. It was then, too, that you saw best the extraordinary kindness which

shone in her wide brown eyes and softened the rashly criticised mouth. The whole make of her face was queenly when in repose; you might admire its structure coldly; but, once the lamp was lit, you had to love it, for through its clear panes shone such generous flames as will warm and illuminate worlds. "And so," men would think to themselves when they met her, "the youth of woman can be a thing as glorious as that."

III

You know how it feels to wake monstrously late and find the sun absurdly high already and the shadows throwing themselves about in strange places, confounding you for the sluggard you are. Auberon rubbed the waking eyes of his mind: where could his wits have been, all the time that the playmate of his humble self was turning into a world's wonder? Unconcealable admiration shone in Mrs. Nevin's half-worldly and half-motherly face whenever she looked at Molly. Even Victor's voice had traces of awe in it while he chaffed Molly about her odd choice of a university. Several explanations, he said, had been offered, from time to time, of the continued existence of Cambridge. Now it would have a clear *raison d'être* at last—for four years, would it be?

"Three, for me! After that you can do what you like with the place." Molly spoke in a way unexampled in her—with hard, bright fluency, like the old hands at this social game: their fencing chatter, meaning nothing at all, had often made her and Bron ill at ease. Why on earth was she putting it on? Could she be secretly afraid of something or other and trying to rush up a screen, as it were, between her and it? Or was it anger of some sort, and she keeping it in? Auberon had never seen the ruffled beauty of an affronted young lioness, yet he began to imagine what it might be.

" I hear that you're a sovereign prince of football-players," Mrs. Nevin said to him absently, with her eyes on Molly and Victor.

He answered, " Not a bit of it," absently too. For some minutes the boy and the social veteran talked in that way, with their eyes and minds not on each other's, and then a distant door was heard opening and two new voices, Thomas Garth's and old Wynnant's, became audible in the firelit hall of the house, through the long drawing-room's farther door.

They seemed to be talking about the conflict then arising between the House of Lords and the most Liberal of all Houses of Commons. " If it comes to a Test Match," said Wynnant, " we'll lose. Too long a tail to our team."

" It's shortened by one joint, I have just heard," Garth replied.

" Oh, ho! " said the peer. " Have old Pallamore's sins found him out? "

" No. It's Follett, my neighbour."

" At last? " said Wynnant cheerfully. " Oft fell he into the fire, they say, and oft into the water."

" Into the mud to-day, my groom tells me—and then died in a fit half an hour ago."

" Good God! " Auberon inwardly said. He was young enough to be awed by this abrupt end put to one at whose throat he had been flying an hour ago. And Molly, too, was young. And she had heard; he had seen her head turn towards the door. But not a sign did she show. It was as if the dead man were a name and no more. How on earth had the frankest person whom he knew picked up in one hour this way of not letting on what she was thinking?

IV

Ever since they had gone to school, Molly had always come, in " the hols," to bid him good-night when he was in

bed, and she on the way to her room. To-night he took it for granted, he could not tell why, that she would not come. But she did. She looked in at the door, as if just to say the two words and begone. Perhaps his face was too rueful to let her do that, and she came in with a sort of reluctance, as though any business she had had with this sort of thing were over now. He drew his knees out of the way, for her to sit on the edge of his bed in the old way. When she did it he talked as fast as he could about a lot of old hobbies and secrets of theirs, trying to keep her still there and to talk them both back by main force to where they were in the summer holidays. Surely, surely everything could just go on as it had always done.

"What's the very oldest thing," he asked, when his own store of topics ran out, "that you can remember?"

"Mine?" she answered. "How should I know? One of the oldest is of you saying, 'It's got in my mind that all the people in the world are just like one big family. Because each person knows somebody and that somebody knows some one else. So everybody is known,' and then you began to be worried about trees not being in the family, though all the animals were. You were quite anxious once, when you woke up in the dark: you said, 'The branches won't be lonely, will they? If they call out in the night, there'll always be one of the gardeners, won't there?'"

"Was that before Vick came?"

"Ages and ages. Don't you remember? He came the day I was eight. He had a green tie, tied in a bow, and a little grey edge of fur to his coat. What absurd things one remembers."

Absurd? No. Not in Bron's sight. As if anybody could ever forget his first minutes with the King or with Victor! And yet he could not just laugh and tell Molly this. The wire was not cut between them, but some non-

conductor or other had made its way in; the genial currents were dulled; some kinds of signals would not pass any longer.

At some moments he fancied that Molly had the same feeling—that she was as helpless as he to hold together whatever it was that was breaking. While she sat there on the bed, there came at times that extraordinary kindness into her eyes; they shed an almost physical warmth over him; they seemed to beg him to take it from her that there were things which would not bear telling, even between him and her. But all the rest of the time he felt her to be receding, as though some harsh call had come to her and she must go away somewhere to be alone and frame her answer.

He did not yet see clearly that he, too, was changing in presence of the changing Molly with the sudden guard on her lips, and the new unfixity of the red and white in her cheeks, and the disquieting disquiet of her eyes, and all the agitated magnificence that her face and her body seemed to have put on since sunset. But everything was unsettled; unfamiliar forces abroad; vague weather-warnings of the approach of novel, tempestuous impulses thrilled him and made him self-watchful. Part of him wanted Molly to go away now; part of him ached to have her stay on and on, as if the world would end when she went. Halting between the two promptings he asked, with his first return, since the smash, to the old dialect of their comradeship, "Sure that you haven't a tempiture?"

Molly jumped up and scouted the notion.

"Because," he pursued, "you look a little like what you did with your tempitures in the measles."

"Oh, rubbish!" she said. "Are you afraid of catching something?"

Of course he wasn't. And yet somehow it did not say itself.

"Oh, good-night then," she said, from the door.

She had not kissed him good-night. In some curious way, he was glad of it. "Goo'night!" he said, "las' glowing goo'night!"

V

On that as on every other day of return from school Auberon had noticed a somewhat hungry look on his father's face. He had seemed to look to Auberon for something that he wanted. What could it be? Auberon wondered. Perhaps for Auberon to resemble some model of what a fellow ought to be. But what sort of model? Well, his father had sent him to Chellingham; must he not want his son to be very much the Chellingham man, the regular type?

Auberon wanted to come up to expectation. So he schooled himself once more to talk and look like the accepted leaders of his school world. He packed away out of sight any freakish ways or individual notions he had of his own. In the tilt of his hat and the lie of his hair he did his level best to conform: he dropped the use of a dozen words that he rather liked, and used the one word "priceless" instead of them all—just during "the hols": where he might have called somebody a little cross, or a bit of a bore or a chatter-box, if he had not taken care, Auberon held himself in and called all those persons "the limit." He took pains to hide from his father a great wish that he had to talk to him about a lot of things other than games.

After a few days of this sturdy self-discipline, Auberon fancied his father was looking less hungry. So Auberon trusted that he had done the 'cute thing; and the next hols, and the next, and so on till the last, he did it again till in his nineteenth year he was in outward seeming, a pattern of self-surrender to that mystic power, the "public-school spirit."

The mystic power laid down a few things that he was to

do, a great many that he mustn't, and also a fair number about which he need not bother. It banned thieving and cheating at games; but canny lies played off on pastors and masters, to get out of a mess, were not tabooed; nor was the talking of filth. The power mocked at snobbishness when it was comically gross, but it paid frank respect to discreet hunters of tufts as practical people who faced the facts of the world. It approved of generosity in some selected cases, but sneered at the notion of letting off a beaten fox that had got to earth, or of doing the chivalrous thing by a foreign country less strong than ours. Courage it honoured worthily, unless it was shown by some other nation in the field to our hurt, or by English workmen in ways that caused their betters to lose money or suffer anxiety, or by a few public-school men in ways which made the rest uncomfortable. Auberon never ceased to be puzzled by the way the power gave the great name of this master virtue to his own pet luxury of total absorption in ecstasies of bodily exertion. As if people played Rugger to kill! Or as if a good boat-race were torture, and all the crews martyrs! That was very funny. Whether a man ought to stick to his work or to cut it, the mystic power did not seem to feel sure. Preachers in chapel would thrill Auberon's soul with clarion calls to play the man and get ready in time to tackle the hard jobs that men had to do. And next day Mr. Chaytor-Tonge would be calling all the foundation scholars "prize pigs," as before, or some much-beribboned General would come down and boast that he had never been far from bottom in form.

"Take it from me"—so the diverse oracles seemed to say, and Auberon "took it" as well as he could from them all, and the result was a fine moral confusion. Some obscure instinct, as peremptory as that which drives cats to go out and dig field-latrines for themselves, even on a wet day,

kept him away from lies and obscenity. But a kind of loyalty in him made him feel that perhaps this cranky abstention of his was not quite the fair thing to do by his fellows. To make amends he conformed to custom all the more closely at points where no fad of his own disabled him for doing so. He went to the expense and bother of smoking until at last he came quite to like it. He tried to remember to drag a few bloodies into his talk, though this ritual seemed rather silly. And, anyhow, he could idle, term after term. To do it, he had to go without food for a certain hungry inquisitiveness that still lingered on in his mind. But one must try to do what is right.

Two or three times, before he left school at eighteen, he awoke with a sudden sureness upon him that he was just a shirker, sneaking along from one funked battle to another, or letting a whole river of splendid opportunities flow past him unused. But these misgivings paled away with the night: their last trace was gone when next a close race or hard game brought its heaven of happy effort and simple aim and its blessed release from diffidence and doubt and mis-adjustment to things around him. What could be wrong with what felt so much like a benediction?

Besides, he was visited, off and on, by his old private rapture—the loveliness of it, that things should be just what they were; jolly or not, pretty or not, still they *were*: that made them exciting—even rain and lost games and the broken leg that he once got at footer. So this was what breaking your leg was: why it was like a new and rare egg to add to your collection: it was tremendous.

BOOK FOUR

CHAPTER X

I

WHEN Thomas Garth matriculated at Oxford, a miracle had lately been done in the place. One Stowell, a man of genius, had managed to turn that beauteous college, St. Mary's, into a seat of education. However he brought it about, most of the men who went up in those days to St. Mary's lost no time in ceasing to be hobbledehoys. Somehow their wits were given a chance to ignite; the dull dogs did not rule, and a freshman soon found he would not count for much there unless he could hold his own in something more than fifth-form chaff.

Lively minds will make their way to wherever the full stir of life is. In Garth's time the college was not only making the most of its men, but getting the men of whom most could be made. So old "Skimmery" men were now to be found wherever any kind of work worth doing was being done well: they stirred the dust of the world; they made a dint on their time. Garth, craving the fairest chance for his son, sent him up to St. Mary's.

But a college may change pretty fast. Stowell had died, and a junior don who had looked, to the saintly elder dons, like a budding Stowell reigned in his stead. His name was Cyril Ducat. Once elected Warden by these innocents, Ducat had bidden a long farewell to the scholar's austere life. He had married at once a plain young woman with a wisp of pedigree and a passion, which he shared, for "knowing everybody who was worth knowing." To ensure his beloved and himself against any shortage of this life-giving contact with "the best people," Ducat chose among the throng of would-be entrants to the college with an unflinching resolve to do no injustice either to blood

without wealth or to wealth without blood. Unknown to Garth, who had lived, of late, so much out of the world, the University wits cut their jokes; they circulated funny copies of verses alleged to be Ducat's latest "Lines to the Premier Viscount of Rhodesia," and so on. Ducat held on his course, unperturbed. The spirited life of the great college was steadily scoured away; the lead went somewhere else.

"We're the funniest gang, at Skimmery," Colin, already a second-year man, explained to Auberon. "Ducat's a collector, and his lines are princes, counts, Gorgius Midases and really illustrious sportsmen like your good self. He also values the Scholars, just to get contrast—a few picturesque paupers, you know—Dominie Sampsons—funny gargoyles—they're thrown in to give a grotesque little tang to this quaint Gothic pile."

"Hullo!" said Auberon. "Where do you come in?"

"Absolute tail of the team. I'm the Last of the Barons, or their offspring. 'Brutus is an Honourable man.' Simple as you see me here, even I am a tuft—a tiny, flash, off-colour tuft, but I serve. I fill up a chink in Ducat's tall edifice."

"What about Victor?" Auberon asked.

"Oh, Victor's *hors concours*. Victor's *sui generis*. Victor is the paragon, the facile conqueror, the cynosure of neighbouring eyes, the Admirablest of local Crichtons, the Beau Nash of this seedy Bath. He can win University prizes without losing caste. When a few eager bloods think of founding a new wine-club they suddenly pause and say, 'Hadn't we better consult Nevin first?' If it weren't for fear of Victor's turning up that piece of consummate modelling, his nose, this bounding college would bound to heights beyond belief. Next year, when Victor goes down, it will

probably have to put up the shutters. What on earth made *you* come to it? "

"Oh! the Guv was a Skimmery man."

"Yes, yes, of course—in the Stone Age."

II

It was the second afternoon of Auberon's freshman term and the two were walking up the famous High—Auberon deep in a trance of grave contentment. Everything else was forgotten. The lovely place, the lovely autumn day, the lovely Virgin Porch of the 'Varsity Church, with the last leaves of creepers lustrously dying about its fanciful twists and flutings of stone; the sun's pensive radiance blessing it all—these things ravished his soul above earth: it was enough to have known them, whatever might come.

He had called on Wetherby, his tutor—a disenchanted survivor from Stowell's band of enthusiasts for the kindling of valiant fires in the youthful mind. Wetherby had eyed him with an air of kindliness without hope. "I suppose," he had said, "your idea is to diversify games with a little rudimentary study? "

"That's about it, I suppose, Sir," Auberon had assented, rather blankly. Before he knocked on Wetherby's door he had screwed himself up to avow a certain wild hope which he had been furtively framing ever since he had known that he was to go up to Oxford. His father had once said in Auberon's hearing that "freedom to learn and freedom to teach " were the mark of a true university. Well, of course, Oxford was that. So lots of fellows there must be happily pegging away, finding out about things that they liked and wanted to know—and actually having these delights counted to them for "work." What if he should be free in this place to pry all day into the very things that had always secretly tickled his curiosity, till he could get to know every

Jack atom there was to be known about that thrilling old sportsman, Cæsar, his marches and fights, contrivings and engineerings, or else about rivers and all their curious habits and ways—why they should scour in one place and silt in another, and wriggle and twist when they crossed level ground, and have amusing little squabbles with each other at their sources, one of them poaching water away from another.

But irony always struck Auberon numb. It made him feel that nothing he could say would be of use. So he only said, "That's about it, I suppose, Sir," and Wetherby sighed gently and made out the usual list of Mods lectures for Auberon to attend. No doubt the disillusioned veteran wrote the big, dumb, civil freshman off as the usual public-school product—just another blob of athletocratic clay to silt up poor Oxford's dulled stream.

An hour after this reverse a magnate no less than the President of the 'Varsity Boat Club had called on Auberon and painted solemnly the brilliancy of the career that might be Auberon's if he stuck faithfully to rowing. And then the captain of the 'Varsity Rugger fifteen had called, solemn and moral as the oarsman, and had adjured the heavy-weight fresher to fritter no time away on trivial things but to leave all else and be ready, if needed, to serve his university in the field.

Here was earnestness; these were no frigid Wetherbies. To each of these two luminaries Auberon had promised humbly to do what he could. But he was free, just for to-day, to walk Oxford with Colin, who led a life of sociable ease, rowed in no galley and toiled in no scrum.

Out of the High they turned sharply in at the bottle-necked end of the Turl. Auberon almost gasped at the sight of that most Oxford-like of Oxford's streets. Fair beyond all desire or dream was the little walled space lifted

intact out of some other age that must surely have possessed its soul more quietly than we do ours. A spirit of grave, courteous tranquillity shed itself into the air between the street's containing masses of weathered masonry: from gardens out of sight a few embrowned boughs hung swaying over high walls. Along this gracious corridor curiously carved out of stone the hollow echoing of their leisurely feet seemed to mingle with resonances lingering on in niche and coign and gateway from times of which Auberon knew almost nothing and yet imagined great wonders.

But Colin was talking. "And Fulford—the prince in disguise—the Bright Apollo—or was it Hercules?—is he still cricket pro in the house of Admetus?"

"Yes," said Auberon, though he could scarcely attend. They were just debouching out of the Turl into the Broad, an elongated oval pond of public quiet, sequestered from the rackety currents of Magdalen Street and the Corn—so Auberon saw it, being helplessly void of the gift of finding nothing wonderful enough to take his breath away.

"Still to be seen in the hols?" Colin was saying.

"Fulford? He came to tennis once or twice this Vac." They were just stepping out from one of the leafy-roofed aisles of the great street of St. Giles into its broad roofless nave. A forested street, a cathedral-like street. Walking in these glades of St. Giles Auberon heard Colin's voice as you hear rain that falls out of doors while you read some great tale by the fire.

Colin was saying, "Well, it's Victor's affair. I'm out of it."

"Out of what?"

"Ever see that humorous picture at Florence—or is it Milan?—the Virgin's suitors breaking their canes in a pet when the Holy Ghost won the lady?—or was it the *bon bourgeois* Joseph?"

"No."

"It's there. And I broke my cane first."

"Blowed if I follow," Auberon said.

"Cast your capacious mind back. To certain Easter hols—the Chantry lawn—and stump cricket?"

Oh yes, Auberon could remember that. Molly, Claude and Fulford had beaten Auberon, Victor and Colin.

"And Victor missing a sitter from Claude, because he was looking at Molly?"

"No."

"And Claude sending Fulford to look for Claude's sweater while Claude poured into Molly's ear the scores he had made at Harrow?"

"Not a bit."

"And Fulford, very much the honourable pro, looking away from Molly so hard that you could tell in a jiff he was seeing nobody else?"

"Oh! Rot!" said Auberon.

"What? No observation? Possibly you don't remember even little Colin, the simple, the homely, none of your outshining Victors or famished heartrending Fulfords or firmly acquisitive Claudes? Simply a super, a poor 'also ran'! 'Among the rest young Edwin bowed.'"

"What Tommy rot!" Auberon said, with a certain lack of variety. His gorge rose at any talk about Molly as some guerdon desired by men. Of course she was that. Everybody from Cambridge seemed to speak, with bated breath almost, of her looks and the admiration they won, and her own coldness. But any man's talk about her as a woman, some day to be mated, hurt him. Oxford had suddenly lost its first blitheness of beauty; something beautiful, too, but inducing an ache, like the baffling poignancy of sunny places left empty, invested it now. He wished he were playing football, or else rowing like fury.

III

Auberon found that the life of most men at St. Mary's was just about as strenuous as lying full length in the sun, with soft music playing. Learning was dross in their sight; base was the slave who worked or was poor. Ducat had done his work well.

Not quite without an effort did Auberon conform once more to his surroundings. Some little part of him was as incorrigibly aristocratic as a good soldier becomes when he is left alone on guard at a dangerous post. That part of him saw well enough the baseness of bilking a generous world and giving a rotten bad bargain to country and friends. It made him wince to think of the figure he cut when guests of his father tried to treat him like a man and talked to him about things which grown men cared for: to have to be always saying "Afraid I really don't know," or "Sorry —I don't know the first thing about it," was too ignominious. To be always a mere vulgar maggot, squirming about in the cheese!—it was too low for anything.

So, even after his failure with Wetherby, Auberon made a little bit of a push to gain some education. He sneaked off to the unfrequented Skimmery library and tried to browse on such works of politics and history as seemed likely, from an inspection of their outsides, to be the right things. Most of these cut up pretty tough. He also dipped into such poets as he had heard named most often at his father's table. Most of their major works affected him only as gigantic freaks of artificial statement. But now and then he struck on a find, like primitive man when he hits, by a happy fluke, upon some intoxicant juice; thus would Auberon pounce upon some morsel of verse :

> Lovely are the curves of the white owl sweeping
> Wavy in the dusk lit by one large star.

Or

The solemn light behind the barn,
The rising moon, the cricket's call,
The August night and you and I—
What is the meaning of it all?

Or a verse at the end of a play:

And all their passionate hearts are dust,
And dust the great idea that burned
In various flames of love and lust
Till the world's brain was turned.

To put these delicious drugs to the supreme test Auberon took heart to submit a sample or two to the judgement of Victor himself. Victor looked out alertly for each author's name. Each was hopelessly modern and unconsecrated. Then he cast a compassionate glance over the lines themselves. "Quite *nice*, you know," he clemently said of one of the things that had stirred his young Philistine friend; and of another, "Well, it looks quite like the real thing, if you hold it far enough off"; and of a third, "A little derivative —eh? No Matthew Arnold, no Mr. Le Smith—Mr. Le Smith, did you say?"

It almost awed Auberon out of the lawless joy he had got from the stuff. He told Colin, and Colin explained, "You see, Victor has been at the centre of every Jack thing that ever was done — in at the birth of the *Agamemnon* and *Hamlet* — used to sit in Raphael's studio and make talk to the woman who sat for the Sistine Madonna—did the right thing at the club with Reynolds and Garrick and Burke—did it all in some previous life, and now he's dumped down here among us duds and yet he's nice to us."

Yes, Victor was nice. He bore, like a saint, with the ungainly struggles of puny moderns to paint or write or think, now that Velasquez and Shelley and Plato were dead. No one could have moved through a deflated world with

more forbearance. His rightful lassitude never led him to hiss aloud the poor actors now shuffling about on the stage; he only registered, with the minimum of asperity, their insufficiency in Jove's sight. Three years of unclouded success at the university had mellowed him to a state more benignly regal than ever; he did not exact deference now; he took its due payment for granted, as kings come into boxes at the play and sit down without looking behind to see that their chairs have been pushed into place. His suavely moulded beauty seemed always to be gaining a more finely curvilinear grace. Auberon felt that his hero's wisdom and wit were never seriously taxed by any occasion that turned up: it seemed as if the little crystals of apt speech that came from his lips must be only a few stray flakes blown away from spacious snowfields brimming with similar brilliants.

To these charms Victor's fourth year at Oxford was now adding the last grace of an exquisite light melancholy. Laurels, laurels, always more laurels—Victor had come to accept these tributes with a face half-humorously wry, as if they were pieces of well-meant impertinence offered in too loud a voice by a second-rate world. Nothing could excite him now, in our small, vulgar day; the nobly exciting things had died out; the only experiences now to be had could be ticked off as sorry engravings printed too late from a worn plate that might have had some merit once.

This air of distinguished tragedy impressed Auberon deeply. Old Vick had been through it, and no mistake. Old Vick must know. So Auberon did his level best to avoid being carried away by his beloved orts and gobbets of verse, as Victor playfully called them; Auberon tried to find them dull; not quite successfully; still he did what he could. And Colin helped; Colin would come bouncing into Auberon's rooms on boisterous mornings of jocund

wind and tell him he must cut everything else and hire a horse and come a-hunting with Colin and the South Oxfordshire hounds across windy Ott Moor.

The lectures that had to be cut, to give time for the chase, led to an interview for them both with the Warden, whose manner, to Auberon's surprise, grew almost benedictive as soon as Colin explained the cause of their defection. From that moment the Warden's main anxiety seemed to be lest he should seem intolerant of "the natural habits of a gentleman."

At that point in the interview Auberon made a sad blunder. "My dear George Washington," Colin said to him afterwards, "what possessed you to say hunting wasn't really a habit of yours?"

Auberon simply couldn't tell. He didn't know.

"The old bounder's face fell like a drop-curtain," said Colin. "He had begun to think you a bit of a blood—venery i' the morn; roulette of an evening; *Wein, Weib und Gesang;* the *bong tong* all round."

Auberon marvelled.

IV

His wonder was not diminished the first time he dined at the Warden's lodgings, near the end of Auberon's first summer term.

Now and again the Oxford Union Society, kindly nurse of many statesmen, flavours one of its weekly debates by inviting a famous old member or two back for a night, to break a lance once more in the lists where they learnt to ride the ring in their youth. For that night the choice had fallen on Thomas Garth and his old friend and adversary, Clement Wade, the Salisbury and Gladstone of Oxford in the far-off 'seventies.

Garth was to stay the night with the Ducats and Auberon was bidden to dinner before the night's tournament.

"Your father," the Warden had said, in inviting Auberon, "forms a very dear tie between you and me." And yet there was a touch of plaintiveness, not quite reproach, in the Warden's manner towards the old friend who had not come off in the world so much as he might. Some instinct of protest seemed to urge Ducat to call to the minds of the guests at his table the many Skimmery men who, since the thirteenth century, had been anything but prodigal sons of St. Mary's—its statesman-Cardinal, Pelham, the man who got the better of kings and squared a match with a pope; its most famous Lord Chancellor, Yorke—almost alone among seventeenth-century bigwigs Yorke had somehow kept his big wig utterly untumbled by the revolutions of that age; its Georgian Primate, Hickling, whose firmness, if better backed up, might have killed in the egg the young serpent of Wesleyanism. All of them seemed to have had a great life of it, well out in the sun, or, as the Warden put it, "reflected credit on the college."

Through a great north-western window, mullioned and bayed, its stained glass storied with the coats-of-arms acquired by some of the saints in this calendar of the Warden's, the evening sunlight fell sideways on the face of Thomas Garth, silhouetting his grave profile while he listened. He had not seen Ducat since they both took their degrees.

The Warden's note presently changed, even before he changed his subject. His tone grew definitely sad.

"It's coming," Colin softly breathed to Auberon, whom he sat next—for the Warden knew all the blood-relationships of the respectable world, and had invited Colin to meet his older kinsman. Some familiar performance, it seemed, was about to begin.

It was. Two years before, the Warden's prayers had been crowned by the matriculation of a minor, but still an

authentic, prince at St. Mary's. The poor lad, a commonplace weakling, had died in his first term, and Ducat's sorrow at this foreclosure of many brilliant hopes had engendered in his mind a sort of memorial vision of this lost link with Courts as an embodiment of all human virtues and graces. The Warden's eyes seemed almost to glaze, as though immovably fixed on some remote and vanishing perfection, while he worked his way now into a reference to the illustrious dead. "*Tu Marcellus eris*," he tragically quoted; he slightly threw up his fine hands in Christian resignation before the untimely ravages of fate.

"*Sed ad laetiora vertamur*," he murmured at last, with an air of self-mastery painfully regained, and he passed manfully on to talk of the eight's fine performance that very afternoon. Auberon had been rowing, and Ducat touched gracefully on the circumstance. "You have done well," he said gravely. "You have reflected credit on your college."

"It's all our number seven, Sir," Auberon eagerly said. "Brown carries all of us along." Ducat had let loose the waters of one of Auberon's little enthusiasms of admiration. This man Brown was really a topper—the tiny instant of leisure that he preserved in his forward swing, no matter how rapid the stroke, and the butterfly touch of the sensitive hands feeling out to almost incredible lengths over the stretcher before nipping in—and the way he took up the poor snatchy stroke set by the failing man in front of him, steadied it, lengthened it, gave it life and power and rhythm and passed it on, thus transfigured, to animate the six toilers amidships and up in the bows! "Tremendous!" Auberon ejaculated, finding no words to describe these perfections more precisely.

The Warden turned smilingly to a silent roseate youth with shiny damp hair matted down backward from the

brow. "Brown?" he said suavely. "A wet-bob at Eton with you, Mr. Foljam?"

"No, no!" said Foljam. Brown, he explained, with quite perceptible distaste, came from "some local school" somewhere up in the north—Bradford, Foljam thought the place was called, but he spoke as if it might pollute him to know exactly.

The Warden instantly lost interest in the whole matter. Colin breathed, soft and low, to Auberon, "It was Ducat's own school." Colin's look was quite discreetly impish.

"There," it seemed to say, "that's what these great ones are like. Listen. Enjoy. Get all the fun you can out of these comedies."

Auberon's eyes, however, were meeting his father's just then. There might have been warmth in this meeting. Had Ducat had one word to say which Garth and his son, those two ready admirers, could have admired, these two shy spirits might have rushed together, united in this generous glow. Instead of that, each found every trace of intimate expression frozen out of the face of the other. Of course it was only because innate courtesy was on guard, in them both, against the scrubby offence of sneering at the man whose salt they were eating. But coldness may strike coldly down, however honourable its occasion. So their minds met for a second without touching; the surface of each slid elusively over the other, as though some lubricant film intervened.

CHAPTER XI

I

IN the Warden's hall, after the early-ending meal, Auberon put as much as he could of the dumb fervour of his baulked goodwill into the squire-like service of helping his father on with his coat. He paid almost fanatical attention to the lie of the collar behind, like a lover after a ball, when he adjusts the cloak round the shoulders of the beloved object still unwon, and perhaps averse—he cannot tell and dare not yet try to find out.

So they walked, together but apart, along the Corn, now all in a hum with its usual vesper throng of blithe idlers, to the debating-hall of the Union. Many faces turned as they came in; a quick cheer rose and Auberon's heart gave a jump. Good! Good!—even those strangers could tell. Good old world—always better, wherever you came to dig into it, than you had thought.

The theme for debate was an old one; it has to haunt the patriotic portion of any people which has contrived to take the lead among nations but feels the breath of strong rivals hot on the back of its neck as it struggles along. Was England still what she had been? Or were ours times of flinching and failure? That was the gist of it.

A manly part of the youth of Oxford shows up well in these debates. Much of the audience is listless and rather cruelly expectant; like loafers who hang round the jumps at a steeple-chase, they are hoping to see some of the riders slip up and fall off their high horses. By Jove, these fellows had pluck!—so Auberon felt as he saw the two first speakers enter stoutly into the perilous loneliness of the man who has got up on his legs amidst a non-convivial crowd and cannot escape into sedentary safety again till he has laid out before these cold people some of the private stuff from the secret

drawers of his mind—perhaps to have it tittered at. How could Auberon weigh the several arguments, as he had meant to? He could feel only a painful craving for each speech to go well; a joke that did not come off made him feel snubbed; once, when a speaker's long pause seemed to threaten a positive access of aphasia, Auberon sweated like a horse.

II

His father spoke third; at one moment Thomas Garth was sitting silent, secure, uncommitted; the next he was standing, doomed to find words, to go on, to struggle through to some unseen end.

For some seconds Auberon kept his eyes on his own knees; all of him nestled in the glowing warmth of happiness kindled by the big audience's welcoming cheer. Then a voice began, deliberate, tranquil and strong, but surprising, as a parade or platform voice commonly is to those who have known its possessor only in the private life. Auberon stole a shy look up. Yes, it was his man: the face's sunken beauty was nobody else's. First he delighted in that, and then, when he could attend to the words, in the speaker's austere refusal to score any cheap, easy point that threw itself in his way. If he ever came near the edge of facile effectiveness, Garth seemed to sheer off as though from shoal water. And yet the energy of his seriousness made the previous speakers seem now as if they could scarcely have cared. Auberon began to feel that he had never known before how burningly eager a man may be to persuade, for love of his country, and also how many things a man of worth will not let himself say, even to save countries.

In good truth Garth was eager. When a man first sees his own countryside from the air, he may espy with astonishment some hitherto unnoticed line, coloured, indented, or raised in relief, cutting like a bar of shadow right across all

the features of the familiar face. Garth, removed from politics now and viewing that well-known ground from a little way off, had caught sight of a discontinuous crack that struck him as opening itself at a sinister pace across the whole landscape. Now at one place, now at another, but always along the same portentous line, the fissure gaped like a streak of black dashes and dots that threatened to run together and split everything.

Men, as a body, had always been trying to get farther and farther away from that base old state of themselves in which the weight of a man's club and the stony cunning of his heart were all that he had to ensure him the right to live out his own life in the way that he chose. And of course the kind of men in whom the tiger or gorilla element is strongest had always kicked against that human movement. They broke out now and then and had to be routed back to their jungles. That was all right: that was natural; the new streak was not that.

It was this. Some crazy impulse to wreck the human cause seemed now to have seized, of all others, the most fragile of human creatures, the ones most certain to stand or fall, in every article of happiness and safety, with the rule of loyal self-control. Women were trying to force a change of law, quite just in itself, by practising the brutal tricks of neurotic male savages. Rich lawyers and traders, men for whom law and order meant as much as plate glass and policemen mean for a jeweller, with his paraded diamonds, were toying with plots for killing their neighbours in Ulster. Among slight-minded people in London chatter about a coming "class war" was becoming the fashion; some of it among people soured by poverty of their own, or naturally prone to envy, or sickened by some passion of pity that had curdled into spite; more of it among the rich illiterates and their harems, who canvassed aloud in flash restaurants the

chances of roping the Army into a " push " to shut up " the talk-shop at Westminster " and scrap " all this representative rot " before Labour could get into power. Thus were the frailest babes in the nursery beginning to bleat for the extinction of the long-suffering nurse who had kept them alive. And everything in Thomas Garth, his passionate conservatism, his instinct of national comradeship, his scorn for vulgar valuations, for bluster and cant—all of him rose up in protest against that puny petulance. To-night he was showing how intensely he longed now to win youth over to the side of sane manhood. What did party matter, he asked; there were splendid men in all parties; the thing was, whatever your party might be, to help to keep it loyal to the imperilled common cause of human decency.

Auberon was amazed to find that he understood every word. It was almost as if his own mind, wondrously cleared, were speaking aloud: why, he must have been thinking these thoughts all the time, and not have known it: now they were marshalled and fixed. He felt shy of cheering; still, the cheers of other people were loud for a while; his own took cover under them. But presently the cover thinned. Once, to his confusion, he found himself cheering alone. Before the speech ended, applause from other listeners had almost ceased. Good Lord! people were not understanding!

Not they. A few virile minds might be stirred, but the appeal to commonplace youth well soaked in the public-school spirit was unquestionably failing. Garth was not paying the regular price of admission to minds reared on the stock assumptions and phrases of a party and a class: no jolly claptrap or fine rattling detraction came to warm the blood of the young amateurs of forced notes and spicy hyperbole. No doubt they felt they were not getting a lead; for their palates Garth's salt had no savour.

A fluttering rustle of relief ran through the hall when Garth ended. Auberon could almost hear the reviving stir of their hunger for more full-blooded stuff. He felt a sore tenderness for his father, now sitting beside him; alone, frustrated, shut up in a pride so clean that it scared little dirty-souled people away, not regaling himself on self-pity, not calling on any one else for one touch of a finger of sympathy—that was how his father lived; he saw it now. He did not dare to put out a hand and stroke his father's. To-night, however, later on, in his own rooms at St. Mary's—to-night he would speak; he would have it all out.

Clement Wade was speaking: he was well launched now; the big abstract phrases were rolling out grandly and making their mark, inspiriting the Liberal minority, goading the Conservative majority to murmurs of dissent. "A boldly progressive outlook," "a new and vitalising conception of human personality," the "increased consciousness of human solidarity in the masses," "the need to envisage the more significant phenomena of our times from a broad point of view"—drip, drip went the big words, falling on Auberon's distracted ears like the pit-a-pat of some leaky tap. Yes, by God! To-night, in his rooms, he would turn the lamp low and make friends with his father.

III

In walking silently down dimly lighted streets, beside a person for whose fuller friendship or better opinion you are hungering, you may find a sharp curiosity growing inside you. What sort of look is the beloved or feared face wearing now? When next a light falls on it will you see there an expression that seems to open welcoming arms? Or one that will hold you off at arm's length? Auberon led the way up the unlighted stairs to his rooms, turned on the red-

shaded lamp that stood on his table and looked quickly across at his father.

The light was unequally cast; it was strong below and weaker above, and his father's face was not illuminated evenly. Its almost grim lower half was well lit; any tenderness that shone in its brown eyes was in the shadow above; no radiant emphasis fell upon it. The general effect was one of enigmatic remoteness. No doubt his mood may well have been one of inward retreat, the mood which often follows lost battles: your world shrinks in round you then, and you shrink in, too, to keep decently away from its touch; round your frustrated hopes you draw impalpable curtains, as screens are arranged round the bed of a moribund patient in a hospital.

Auberon's spirit quailed. He nervously got busy at his hospitable duties, offering drinks, tobacco, a churchwarden pipe—anything to put off a little longer the time when they should each be sitting back in a big chair with nothing trivial left to be done—only that plunge to be made.

But the awful time came. Silence set in. A weak flame was leaping a little amidst the low glow of the fire before them; Auberon watched it; he tried to mesmerise himself, by staring at it hard, into making his great effort in a kind of trance. He ran over hurriedly, in his mind, the things he was going to say; they had filled his head tight at the Union—admiration and thanks, and regrets for his own waste of his youth—and how he knew that he never could come to much now, but that he did see at last that all one's time had got to be a fight for the right things, and couldn't even a crock like him hope to be given some small coolie job to do for the cause?

The tiny flame leapt in the grate more and more feebly; he was watching it still when his father lanced the swollen silence with a trivial enquiry: was "Battel call" still a

weekly rite at St. Mary's? Did men whose week's battels —college bills—had run rather high receive them in the hall, from the Warden's own hand, instead of the butler's—just to let them see that he knew all and that wasters were scrubs in his sight?

Oh no! Auberon said; Ducat had scrapped all such slights on free spenders. "I don't mean, Sir," Auberon added, "that that's an excuse for myself." As a fact he had not been profuse—was not dressy, ran no ticks in the town and had declined a proffered welcome to Colin's pet Apolaustic Club of gay livers. Still, conscience was ready, just then, to find fault with everything he had done. Besides, he must make his way, somehow, towards the fearful job he had on.

"You've not done badly," his father said, "in that way. Better than I. First states of etchings had a terrible lustre in my day. They went to the head. Hullo! you're wanting to work?"

Auberon must have made some fidgety movement in his distress. His father was rising.

"Don't go, Sir," Auberon implored, and the other's movement was checked. "Precious little work I've done, Sir, all this year," he hurried on—he mustn't stop now: he must keep his tongue going. "I've been a wash-out, Sir. I——" Oh, Hell!—it was sounding all wrong. "I," "I," "I,"—it seemed as if he were uttering no other word : *his* shirking, *his* failure, *his* regret—wasn't it all just the shabby old egoist trick of jawing about one's dear self, only got up in a humbugging moral disguise, as remorse and the like? The flow broke off.

"You've three years yet," his father said. It sounded cold. Garth had always tried not to do his son and his ward the wrong of trying to live their lives for them—to fight their battles, make their choices, rob them of the risks

and glories of autonomy. "And after that——?" he added and paused a moment, and then "Of course I've no right to pry," he added again.

"Well, Sir," Auberon awkwardly said, "the dons do talk of the Church."

Garth listened, rather blankly, and Auberon felt that for once he was seeing right into his father's mind. Was not his father's thought this—"So they're shunting him into that siding. 'Put me into one of the priests' offices, that I may eat a piece of bread.'" His father had quoted that once. Did Auberon know, his father asked now, that Gistleham was a family living.

"I know," said Auberon. "I thought of that." He did not say that he had only known since yesterday. Ducat had told him. Trust that connoisseur of loaves and fishes to know everything—the income, the size of the parsonage house, the ripeness of Uncle Quentin for the grave. Nor did Auberon say that his own thought had been "Parson perhaps, but no family living for me!" But now it seemed too cheap—to renounce what nobody had offered to him. So he let his words stand at their wretched face value.

How should Garth, with his deep respect for every man's privacy, know what was behind the face that gazed, as containedly as his own, into the shallow bed of red embers where the little flame had now ceased to jump? A silent minute passed in that guarded gazing, and then the elder spoke, in the slightly changed tone that announces a new topic. "Did I tell you that I have some sort of strained heart—may 'cease upon the midnight,' you know, without giving fair warning. You ought to hear one or two things. You'll be one of Molly's trustees, after me, if you're of age then."

"Rather the other way round, up to now, Sir," Auberon

said. All this was too moving. He had to take refuge in a little jocularity.

"Of course it's only technical. She'll run herself. Still, you might have things to fix up if she ever marries.

"Yes."

"There's some one wanting to marry her."

Some one! Wasn't every one? But all that Auberon said was "Victor?"

"Victor?" his father's voice expressed surprise. Middle-aged men are often surprised that babes of twenty-three should think of marrying wives. "The man I mean," said Garth, "calls himself Fulford." He looked at Auberon rather hard.

"I know, Sir," Auberon answered the question in his father's look.

"You know who his father is?"

"I've known—" Auberon paused to count up—"for two years and a half."

"Do people at Chellingham know?"

"Molly does."

"Any one else?"

"Not that I've ever heard of."

"You've held your tongue well."

They had another minute's stare at the fire. "And Molly, Sir," Auberon ventured at last: "what does she say?"

"She has not heard about it."

"Oh!"

"You mean it's queer he should speak to me only? He has reasons—decent enough. He wants to make good before he lets on to her. You know—his record?"

"Only the cricket, Sir."

"He hadn't a chance to go straight. His mother died at his birth. His father's house was a slum. So he came the grand smash that he had to—shirking, wasting, booze—

only no foulness with women. I picked him up on the low-path with his bones sticking out. He wasn't really a wrong un: only by accident. So I got him to Chellingham. All right there, wasn't he? "

"Straightest man in the place."

"I thought so. Till he got down to that job he hadn't ever found out what it's like to wake up in the morning and feel that life is a lark because one isn't a scrub. It was then he discovered, and now he ain't letting it go. His pride is all right. It's on his mind that he didn't come into the house as an equal—and that his father's name stinks too much to be offered to any one till he makes good—that he ought to do something big—at any rate ten years or so of coolie work before he lets on to the lady. The Jacob idea, you know—doing time to win Rachel."

He looked at his watch and rose. "Not going, Sir!" Auberon said in distress. This dismaying talk about Follett and Molly had finished the wreck of his plan.

Yes, his father must not keep the Warden's servants out of their beds. They crossed the quad together in silence, under the murmuring chestnut trees; they said good night at the Warden's door. As Auberon walked off to his staircase he turned in mid-quad and looked back. A light came out, as he looked, in a bedroom window of the Warden's lodgings. His father must be there. "Rush back," some warm-hearted prompter seemed to say inside him. "Hammer on the door till some one comes. Say you must see your father again for a moment—very important." He almost obeyed. But the light that had brightened the upper half of the Warden's glazed door went suddenly out while he looked. No, he would be rather a beast to drag that sleepy maid back now. She would be half-way to bed.

Through an open window on the far side of the quad there came the poignant beauty of a tenor voice. "Du

meine Seele, du mein Herz," it sang, insistently lovely, and he stood to listen. Great stuff, music! The way it said things that words didn't say—how the bitterest pain and a curious sort of delight were mixed together, and hopeless love itself and helpless estrangement might come trailing a rending loveliness behind them. He was wretched, wretched, and yet some sort of poignant grace was abroad; it shed itself on the air like the smell of wild thyme when you tread on the plant in the dark. Simply tremendous!

CHAPTER XII

I

AFTER that midnight failure Auberon entered, as mariners are liable to do, a region of doldrums, or immobile air. Everything was sunny and easeful, but not a capful of wind came to fill the sails of his unencouraged wish to live manfully. During these second and third of his years at St. Mary's he laid well and truly the foundation stones of an ignominious degree at the end of his fourth. Perhaps he was not one of the meanest of drifters. He did not quite sink to the grade of the most paltry shirkers, those who work up in themselves a kind of contempt for people who put away their toys in good time and make ready to fight in the firing-line. He had no sloppy illusions about his rowing and his games; he knew well enough that merely to shine in these little simulacra of effortsome life was not playing the man.

Now and then, too, his mind could still be tickled a little by something that he came across in the dull round of his reading for the Schools. No doubt philosophy, in bulk, was stodge, as every one said; still, there seemed to be some fetching notions knocking about in it; that one about "matter" and "form" was great—the idea of "form" as all the purposeful rightness and beauty there is in a thing or a person—the lovely, perfect statue that's somewhere in every block of stone, only waiting for the right man to chip away all the clogging formless "matter" that clings round it and keeps it from being the topping thing that it might be. Fine, too, the notion of how you didn't really have a feeling first and then express it, while it just stayed where it was—how the feeling itself was changed, just by being expressed; you let a yell and, behold! the feeling that made you yell had moved on into some new state of itself; it had

changed by issuing in that yell; and so expression *was* feeling, in a way—a mode of feeling, one of feeling's ways of completing itself. Great notion! At least, so it seemed till he put some inexpert expression of delight in it into a weekly essay for Wetherby, and the old tutor smiled wearily over the crudity of the phrasing.

Ancient history, too, had to be read for his Greats; and just before Auberon's third Easter at Oxford his fumbling study of the affairs of Rome reanimated one of his childish hobbies so much that he made up his mind to sneak off to Rome by himself for the first ten days of the vacation, just to see what the Forum of Cæsar, his secret and infamous old friend, might look like. He had even taken his ticket—rather a strain on flagging end-of-term finances. But he was detected; the sacred name of "loyalty to the college" was invoked; was it fair for a Rugger Blue to go slinking off, in Skimmery's hour of need, on some grubby smug quest of his own? So he was carried off to the North on a tour of holiday football, instead. The faintly flaming flax was well quenched again.

After any of these checks had been put upon unseemly ardour, Auberon would sink back, in a kind of dreamy ease, and repose himself once more on the pleasing spectacle of life in Oxford. Just to look round that goodly place and to let its jolliness soak into him—that was an occupation good enough to fill up many whole days. It seemed positive profanation, on sunny mornings of May, to sit alone in a coldly lit, north-facing room, head down at a book, while he knew that below in Skimmery porch everything would at that moment be blithe—men in gowns, with their shaved morning faces, flitting past or through; new lists and notices of crews and elevens and meetings going up on the board; the little chubby college porter running to and fro, eagerly obliging everybody; out in the broad, quiet street the cabbies

gambling cheerfully among their antique hansoms, and all the sparrows alert, under the horses' heads, to pick out of the cracks between the cobble stones the least grain of oats spilt from the nosebags. Alive, alive, oh!—the tingle of living ran through everything: how could any one reject the call? At the Beefsteak Club the massed scents of thousands of cut flowers lying on the market stalls below would be coming in at the open reading-room window along with the voices and whistlings of popular tunes so pretty and merry that surely they could not die out as others had done; the London papers would be on the smoking-room table by now, all excitingly full of things that were making this the greatest age there ever had been—the first flight overseas; the new, horseless London; the fight between the Lords and the Commons, the shouts of rebellion in Ulster, the capping of warships with Germany. The mere molecular stir of existence went to his head. Just to snuggle up close to the good world's warm body and get the fullest sense that he could of its genial racket and rhythm—it seemed almost sin and waste not to do that. It was like looking on at a fire or hearing a lovely song sung: who could do anything but attend to it? So each of his terms told off, in a delicious reverie of idle adoration, its rosary of golden days.

II

He did nothing beastly. He had no mind to. His sensuous joys were those of health—the rapture of the dive through radiant morning mists from the roof of the Skimmery barge into the twelve-foot deep at the old mouth of the Cherwell; the body's daily sweat, needful as its daily bread; the nightly melodies of jocund chaff and songs plashing like unseen fountains under the trees of the great garden quad. He had no morbid, inflamed sense of sex and he did not brood over its mysteries. Physically puissant like a healthy

forest-tree, and super-masculine with the husbanded virility of the self-controlled, he was simply not bothered at all by any coarse importunacy of unsatisfied physical instinct. Possibly this was transmuted into something more subtly restless—partly an ache of vague longing for closer union with the beckoning beauty of the visible and audible world; partly a persistent consciousness of Molly as a figure seen rather far off and always advancing amazingly, like some late and quickly-bursting summer, into new marvels of loveliness outshining memory itself, with every man's eyes turned towards her—and yet also always receding into some splendid and enigmatic new condition of herself.

But the mere non-committal of excesses which have not tempted you may bring but little consciousness of worth. Compunction pricked Auberon pretty severely during the last winter and spring before the Day of Wrath that seemed likely to print the brand of the shirker condignly on his brown, ingenuous brow. Urged by this goad he offered sacrifices—real, painful ones, like Abraham's of Isaac; he forwent the proffered joy of rowing in the be-puffed and be-slobbered but still delectable race against Cambridge. He gave up for a long time the delights of midnight talks with a friend in a firelit room, when two minds could set out together on such entrancing voyages of venturesome exploration.

Most of the hours thus reclaimed from happiness he spent with his eyes fastened rather more continuously than his mind upon an open page of some text that he was bidden to read for the Schools. The winter was rainy and Auberon heard a good deal of a certain drip of rain from a drenched eave above his window to a stone pavement below. Few sounds are less cheerful than this pit-a-pat to the ear of any rueful looker-back across wasted years. The dreary and incessant rhythm of its incidence suggests the perpetual

pulse of some futile regret. "All over now—irrevocable now"—the syllables are almost sounded in your ears as you it alone with that somewhat heartlessly taunting refrain.

Still, he stuck pretty tight, for two whole terms, to the irtuous practice of sitting face-to-face with the classics, with numb mind. Nobody helped him to make the dry bones ome to life. Not a single living mind was at hand to lift he opaque veil which "the grand old fortifying curriculum" f his education had drawn between the marriageable beauty f knowledge and this baffled wooer. Obloquy in the ollege formed the only reward of his painfully framed esolve not to row in the Eights in his last summer term, but keep his whole time free for work.

And then that last term came, bewitching with beauty; ngling, too, with that poignant attribute of being the last. f you knew that in eight weeks you would be dead, how ou would want to rush about and drink once more the cup f the sweetness of one beloved place and another, and break p all the stupid reserves that had prevented you from elling this and that friend how much you had liked them all he time. Up and down the mellow city of ripe friendships nd of sun-warmed stone, over its little hills and rivers and mong its gardens and birds, were blown the intoxicating cents of early summer and of a passing away. So the old mpulse, now more untimely than ever, came back with an rresistible urgency.

Could it be really right to sit alone and frigid, sniffing at avourless print, with all that fugitive and irrecoverable love- iness and friendliness flowing away out of doors, running o waste? Was it not the only gloriousness in life to jump p, to go out, to embrace it all, to lose nothing of the perish- ble feast, to live glowingly, while he could, in the air and he sun, with his friends?

III

Colin was still hanging on at St. Mary's. Ostensibly he was pursuing into a fifth year the Pass degree which the gaiety of his youth had not suffered him to achieve at the usual season. But really he was turning serious. "Life is real, life is earnest," he told Auberon, one radiant Sunday morning: the two were walking bare-footed through dewy June cowslips and long varnished grass, towing up-stream beyond Eynsham a skiff that had a guest, Claude, reclining at ease in its stern. "We've been innocent idlers too long. It's time we turned robbers."

"What's the fun of it?" said Auberon doggedly.

"Fun isn't everything. What about filial duty? I wouldn't break with my father for worlds—I don't know any man, of his age, more amusing to talk to. But he suggests that it was time I was spunging on some one not him."

"I suppose," Auberon faintly suggested, "there's no real work one could do." He saw, at least dimly, that Chellingham and St. Mary's, between them, had disequipped him pretty thoroughly for the service of the world. They had made him as competent as a newly hatched sparrow to keep himself alive if he were suddenly dropped out of the nest. Outwardly unaggressive, unoriginal, unstudious, anti-demonstrative, anti-extreme, he exhibited all the approved negative qualities of the well-to-do English. Of knowledge to fit him for life on this planet he scarcely had any. He had to drop out of a conversation when any one mentioned Donatello or Dalton, or Garibaldi or Lincoln or Pitt; he did not know the brothers Adam from Adam the brotherless, could not tell you the names or the paths of three stars, nor how tramcars were moved, nor how a watch worked, nor why it was cold in winter. And now he vaguely

suspected the seriousness of such wants, and he had not conceit enough to keep him quite cheerful.

Colin gaily derided the notion. "What sane man," he said, "would stump up to have his work done in the way we work here?"

"That's sound," said Auberon ruefully.

"If we did diddle some simple capitalist into taking us on, to polish the brass and so forth, he'd find out in a week. The only employers that never find out are (1) the Church and (2) the State. Look at Claude—they've had him two years in the Army, and yet they don't fire him out. Look at my father—a diplomat *pour rire*, I imagine—but what a brilliant and comfy career! Once get your name on the books and they keep paying out, faithful unto death—the death of the payee."

Auberon grunted, and Colin resumed: "You see the State's so big it can hold heaps and heaps of duds and not feel the difference. Much too big a cheese for a few reasonably cheery maggots to muck it all up."

Auberon spoke with laboured unconcern: "Ever think of the Church?"

"No. I could never make the right faces."

Auberon said rather shyly: "Some of the parsons seem to have got hold of something."

"New way of life and so on?" Colin's tone was quite sympathetic and liberal.

"Well, something more than pi-jaw and signing Articles."

"I don't deny it, friend," Colin said. "No denyings for me. I'm much too sceptical for that."

"Know the Skimmery Mission, in Stepney?"

"First I've heard of it."

"I stayed there last year a bit. The neighbours were great."

"The local plebs?"

"Yes. Their adventures lick Robinson Crusoe. Fellows get up and shave and turn out in the morning with nothing to eat till they've earned it. Straight fellows, too. I knew one that hadn't had a sov in his hand except once in his life—and then it was a mistake. He'd got it instead of a bob from some fat old boy that he'd whistled a cab for. My man tore after the old fatty's cab and pushed the quid back on him. I was there—saw it."

Colin frankly admired. "*C'est beau, ça,*" he said. "Still, it's no wonder your friend is not in big business."

"A sahib," Auberon said. "Like Early Man, too—just dumped on the earth, with the job to do every day—food to get hold of, and some sort of a hole for wet nights. Queer, you know, to think one was never like that—never will have been, perhaps; only a sort of amateur human being—not a proper, all-in, sink-or-swimmer, up against the big adventure *bona fide*."

Auberon had grown almost fluent. "Go it," said Colin. "Every man to his vein—for you the tall, the hardy line of Romance; for me the Picaresque, because I have in my blood half the rogues of all time."

"O, bilge!" said Auberon.

"Bilge? You name my element. And so Holy Orders appeal?"

"In a way. Not the putting your name to a lot of old stodge that you know isn't true except in some funny poetical sense. It's the getting close up to those real people that fetches me."

"Pinkhill, by the Rood!" said Colin. "Your turn to steer." They drew the boat in to the lonely lock, cast away in the limitless meads of cuckoo-flower and marsh-marigold, dreamy now with quivering haze and sabbatical peace.

IV

Claude, their guest, had achieved greatness of late. Not as a cavalry subaltern—there he was rumoured to be nothing out of the way—but as the best bat in the whole British Army, by a long chalk. So he was let off almost all duty in summer, to play for the M.C.C. or else for Wessex, for the honour of the Army. For the past three days he had been staying in Oxford to play and, only yesterday, had scored 120 for the M.C.C. against the University. Out third wicket and back in the applauding pavilion, Claude had said, somewhat audibly, to the embarrassed Auberon, "Well, I suppose we shall all be out for about 20 more."

Success had made the blond Claude more solemn than ever, especially when cricket was mentioned by persons undistinguished at it; Claude would then become cold and unbending, as if rude boys were pestering him for his autograph. Colin delighted in this trait of Claude's, and made every opening he could for its exhibition. At dinner last night at the club, with Auberon and Claude, Colin had kept the talk running on cricket. "As a matter of fact I scored 130, not out, the next day"; "My average that year, as a matter of fact, was the best of any amateur's south of Notts"—countless admissions like these, made in a voice almost austere, were elicited by Colin. Auberon had felt that the phrase "As a matter of fact" had somehow divested these utterances of anything like swank: it seemed to turn them into pure passionless history.

But Claude's most frequent theme had been "the rabbits"—cricketers of mean capacity. You might have supposed these poor rodents were really plague-carrying rats, so utterly did they seem to have darkened whole sunlit worlds in match after match. Conscience had whipped Auberon, as he listened, with thoughts of all the rotten cricket that he had

played in his time. "I raise my glass," Colin had said, rather late in the meal, "to our fearless friend, the Scourge of the Bunnies." In a grave voice, with twinkling eyes, Colin had condoled with Claude in the pain he must feel at being torn away by duty from a soldier's darling preoccupations with his men and their horses till Claude became restless in his chair as though there were unlocatable fleas in his underclothing.

"My C.O.," Claude had said grimly—in answer, perhaps, to something divined rather than said—"is not an absolute fool. Any rabbit can go on parade, but the Colonel understands the good it does a regiment to have an officer playing in first-class cricket."

"A fine old English Colonel," Colin had said demurely. "One of the olden time." And yet Claude had still had that itchy appearance.

V

From Pinkhill Lock to Bablockhithe it was Claude and Colin who towed, walking abreast, with the tow-rope tied to the middle of a boat-hook held horizontally in front of their waists. At first they said nothing. Claude, I fancy, always felt unsafe with Colin; Colin's talk was pestilently full of man-traps and spring-guns. Still, it seemed there was something that Claude wanted to know. "Had Miss Garth been in Oxford?" he presently asked.

"Molly? Not that I know of," said Colin. "Anything to bring her up just now?"

"Well, a little decent cricket, shall we say?" Claude answered in rather bitter reproof. "Was it true," he went on after a little, "that that fellow Fulford had had the cheek to be looking her way?"

Colin asked, "Doesn't every one?"

Claude protested: "My good sir, the man is a menial."

"He might have been a rabbit. I should have thought

you'd class him, on his batting alone, as one of the best matches in Europe."

"I suppose he'll retire after a bit," said Claude darkly, "and keep a small tuck-shop."

"So did my grandmother's father. In Chicago. Acid drops were his staple, I fancy."

"Well, I've some respect for Miss Garth."

"Might even have—cast an eye?—hey?—if only Nevin hadn't——"

"What the hell has he to do with it?"

"Isn't that what all the little love-sick beggar-boys said when King Cophetua came butting in and cut them out?"

"Can't say I follow you. Nevin's simply an 'intellectual.' Better turned out, I'll admit, than the ruck of them. Still, he's simply a damned intellectual."

Claude gloomed for a while. Then Colin said sweetly, "Come to think of it, the lady *will* be here, quite soon. Eights Week, you know—week after next. Victor too, I believe."

Claude grunted.

"They come for the Saturday—the rising barrister's half-holiday, you know. Why not come too, just to make a last stand?"

"Can't. I shall be playing at Lord's."

"Again!—that clarion call of duty! Well, there's plenty of willow at Lord's to make you a garland. Bron and I can go for ours to the Cherwell, up by Marston Ferry."

"Bron! You!" A dull amazement filled Claude's face. "Well, I'm damned!"

"We all are," Colin said, "except Nevin."

Auberon, viewing these two from behind, some eighty feet off, perceived regretfully a certain expressiveness in Claude's broad back—something of stiffness, of cold guarded-

ness—what there is in a dog when he slowly approaches a strange and possibly noxious dog. Queer, Auberon mused—the way some fellows never get on together, though they're perfectly all right really, both of 'em.

VI

Steering a towed boat is conducive to musing. The business of keeping her nose well out of the force of the stream, and yet clear of bushes and headlands and shoals, is constant but light; the gliding rhythm of small noises as the bank slides past, the mildly resistant lapping of the water under the inshore bow, the little whispering swish that runs along the gunwale now and again when it rubs softly past some jutting tussock of grass and buttercups—all this run of minor melodies helps your own thoughts to trip along fluently.

Plenty to muse upon, too, with Molly and Victor coming on Saturday week. Mrs. Barbason was motoring down from town for that day to see friends at the House: she had offered Molly and Victor a lift, there and back; Auberon was to give the two of them tea between the races and dine them at the old Mitre before they were borne back to town?

Molly coming! Molly soon to be moving about in Auberon's room at St. Mary's! He saw already the marks of her glove on the back of her hand when she would take it off and drop it on a chair. She would look at his two dozen books and his more numerous pewter rowing prizes with the affectionate interest of grown-up people in the small contraptions of children. So it had been, last summer, when the Skimmery eight had been in training at Henley. His father and Molly had come, the week-end before the regatta, to stay at The Shanty, the Nevins' palatial cottage near Shiplake, and Auberon had walked from Henley on

the Sunday morning and Molly had met him at the Nevins' garden gate.

He had seen her from half a mile off, waiting for him, a white speck moving about under the gateway arch of honeysuckle and wild roses. If he had never known his malady until then, he would have known it by the pang he had felt at her untroubled eagerness to greet him. A beloved younger brother, home from school—not a bit more, not a bit more.

"You good, familiar object!" she had exclaimed—this wondrous disturbing grown woman who had once been his chum. She had thrust her arm under his to lead him on to the house. "Say you feel shy and frightened," she had said, "as I do, in this shiny place."

That garden, indeed, was all putting-green lawns and brilliant blooms trained to the hour, like oarsmen. "And all the boathouse sticky with paint," Molly had said. "The poor flies are hardly dead in it yet. And oh! the women's clothes! I'm the dowd of the place because I'm not changing all day. Thanks be for your dear baggy knees, you real live person." And then she had pressed his arm fondly, close to her side, and he had pressed hers in return and accepted the bounds set by fate.

Joyce Nevin, the only child of the house besides Victor, had grown up into something that Auberon remembered now as alarming indeed—tall, very dark, very handsome no doubt, always dressed up to the nines, a marvel of social expertness, and yet rather like somebody half absorbed in looking for something that she had mislaid—and almost angry with humble people like himself for not knowing what it was, or for wanting to know—which he didn't—or doing the wrong thing somehow or other. Jove! How she had dropped on him!

On that hot Sunday afternoon at Shiplake, the four young

people had tea'd by themselves in the Nevins' Hesperidean orchard, looking out lazily over the river. "'Ploughing the water,'" Victor had murmured pensively, as some boat passed. "'The boat ploughs the water.' Stale metaphor —really quite good, though, when new. I wonder who said it first. Noah, perhaps. I wish it had been I."

And then Auberon had been smitten—he shuddered to think of it now—with one of his few impulses to take a line of his own. "'Fraid it shouldn't really *plough* the water," he had said rashly.

"*Quoi donc*, O literal one?" Victor had smiled indulgently as he spoke. "Should it harrow it?"

At that, Auberon had laboured clumsily to make his point—that all these light river boats, as it seemed to him, had to be lifted up, more or less, on to the top of the water with the first part of your stroke, and then kept sliding forward there, over the slippery top.

Victor's face had expressed an amused scepticism. "Tobogganing? I see," he had said in his sweet tone of ironic humility. And when Auberon was gravelled by this handling and said nothing more, Joyce had burst in. "Argue, Bron. Stick to your point," she had said, with a little frown that made the soft dark down on her upper lip look quite angry. Just to oblige, he had tried to keep up his end for a few moments more, with no hope of prevailing, till Victor's expression of having mercy on humble absurdity prostrated him altogether. And, even then, Joyce had flung across at Auberon another of those goading looks. "Take your own part. Why don't you take your own part? You know what you're talking about, and he doesn't," that look of scornful incitement seemed to convey.

But what was the use? Wasn't it all only talk? Nothing would have to be done on the strength of it. And old Vick must be right in some higher sense than the merely

mechanical one, some lofty, poetical sense. And, besides, there had been Molly to look at, just for that day, and you could not look at Molly while you were trying to argue with somebody. Molly had to be looked at almost constantly now, she was changed so amazingly each time he saw her, and every time the sight of her overwhelmed him with new ideas of the mystery and majesty of young womanhood—not its splendour of colour and glow and soft curvilinear loveliness only, the ripening of fruit and the mantling of roses, but also the queenly creature's air of immersion in some mystic adventure—some affair of rising exaltations, daunting previsions, tremendous choices. A match had been struck as they sat out of doors in the dark after dinner at Shiplake that night, he with his eyes on the place where Molly's unseen face must be; so he had suddenly seen her face revealed as it had been under cover of night, its lips slightly opened, its eyes almost glazed with intentness, so fixedly had they been fastened on that point in the darkness where Victor's face now came into sight.

Of course he had not seen that a third pair of eyes was as glassily fixed on the portion of darkness hiding his own honest mug. A very strong man in the bodily way, Auberon looked stronger still. Rowing develops the forearms: the mighty breadth and swell of Auberon's showed puissant thongs of lithe sinew flicking and interplaying visibly under the skin embrowned to a deep walnut colour with many shimmers of sunburn—brownest of all where the huge arm, at its imposing maximum of visible power, had passed under the tucked-up sleeves of a white shirt when Auberon had pulled stroke that afternoon and Joyce, in the stern, was sitting face to face with him, his knuckles almost touching her knees each time he swung forward. Auberon framed scarcely any visions of himself. It did not cross his mind that to a woman of disengaged heart and of sane vital ardour

he might appear as a new revelation of sun-fed strength almost incredible in its simple sanity and unconsciousness, like a young oak, or a whole forest, or Nature itself—all that Adam had to offer to the senses of Eve.

What he remembered most clearly of that Shiplake day was not so much any one's doings as the look and the feel of everything at certain moments—the kind coolness of the twilight with the measured dip and low plash of sculls and chimes of quiet laughter coming up the garden slope from boats going home, some with a single Chinese lantern hanging by a string from an invisible mast-head, the little globe of light swinging aft at each forward thrust of the boat, and more slowly back; and then the subsiding of those distinguishable sounds and the relative rise of the river's own more intimate night voice, drowned during the day—the murmurous sum of all the private proceedings of the stream, its little lappings against piles and rafts, its infinitesimal babblings round snags and whispering passage among swaying reeds and long streaming grasses, the confidential purr with which the whole Thames nestles in under his banks and stows his waters snug and even; and then the homeward walk along the deeply shaded Henley road, where little jets of low laughter and whispered talk came from rustic lovers hidden in every recess of shadow deeper than the rest; and the clearing, near Marsh Lock, where he had leant on a roadside wall and looked down for a while at the long lasher's sloping line of cold foam, with its everlasting old tune, and had somehow felt desperately out of it and left to himself and yet ready to cry with a kind of joy at the loveliness of it all.

CHAPTER XIII

I

JOYCE NEVIN was, as you know, a regular glass of fashion and mould of form. Still, she saluted in Molly the right that some rare and beautiful women have to ress as they please and let fashion go hang. "Molly," he said to Victor after breakfast that Saturday morning when Mrs. Barbason was to motor him and Molly to Oxford, "is ressed to perfection, always." Joyce spoke with a touch of ontempt, as though she meant, "Why should I have to tell ou all this?"

"My dear, I don't dissent," said Victor serenely.

"Molly," said Joyce, "hardly ever wears just what the est of us do. But any woman who sees her, and isn't a ool, says to herself, 'She has got there, and I haven't.' And et Molly doesn't know she has got there, any more than he knows she's the loveliest woman there is."

"They *are* rather dears—all the Garths," Victor said nusingly.

"They're heaps more than dears."

"Oh, yes, they have their *patine*."

"I should think so. Imagine any relation of ours hucking all the big vulgar prizes, as Mr. Garth did!"

"Yes—a *Cato de nos jours*. And hasn't the young Artemis some mighty scheme of self-immolation as well?"

"Yes—a 'games mistress' job—the worst-paid she could nd. At some monster day-school in London—in one of he desert parts that you see from the train, going to Scotland. he thinks the girls in those parts can't be getting half the ames they should. So she must see to it. And, once she tarts, she'll work there till she dies—unless——" Joyce aused, glanced at the clock, and then plunged: "Victor, narry her, quick. You may be too late."

"Rivals—hey?" In Victor's voice there was no consternation.

"Don't you ever look at anybody? Not at Claude? Nor Colin March? Nor at the mystery man who's a cricket pro and dines at the Chantry? Nor any one else? Not that it's any one else who's your danger. It's Auberon."

Victor playfully expostulated: "Bron! My Bron, that has fed from my hand! My good Joyce, they're brother and sister. And Bron is a Dobbin, a true Suffolk Punch, a dear Goodman Dull."

Joyce had moved round to the back of Victor's chair. "Can't you see?" she said. "That makes her sorry. It hurts her when Bron doesn't shine. Can't you conquering Apollos understand that big noble babies like Bron are terribly winning?—they want help so much, and women—some women, ones like Molly—want to help people."

Victor, in his turn, looked at the clock. "Oh, Zeus!" he said, "the Barbason will be here in five minutes."

II

For some four hundred yards down the stream, below Folly Bridge, the many college barges of Oxford embroider the left bank with a gaily figured hem of quaint shapes and dissimilar colours. In June an awning of great boughs rustles and sways above them; it throws a changeful chequerwork of light and shade down on this strip of lively pattern. Up from the water, too, which is being constantly broken by punt-poles, paddles and oars, there plays a perpetual discharge of jets of dancing light, reflected or refracted from the shifting ripples. So on each of the six afternoons of the Eights, when the balustraded roofs of the barges, empty at most other times, break out into blossom with the festal hats and dresses of undergraduates' sisters and mothers, all this long floral border gains from its doubly animated illumina-

ion a look of shimmering vivacity. To a sympathetic mind his effect may seem to be reinforced by many fugitive gleams and exchanges of less literal rays between the molecules of the holiday company—eyes taking light at each other, all the fugitive sparks struck out of youth on contact with youth.

From one particular speck in this shining scene there was not projected, at one particular moment on that Saturday afternoon, any ray of care-free jocundity. This inconsiderable dot was Auberon. Standing a little behind his two guests, Molly and Victor, on the high poop of the Skimmery barge, he was being gnawed by that anxious instinct of hospitality which, like love, feareth all things, lest any be forgotten that should have been remembered. And now, a mere twenty minutes before the Second Division race was to start, his heart stood still for an instant as he remembered a damning gap in his arrangements for tea in his rooms at Skimmery after the race. Cream for the strawberries!—clean forgotten!

Nothing to do but bolt at once, buy the stuff at a little shop that he knew, and hie away to his rooms, to set it out decently, with the rest of the spread, on his table. He thought, for a few seconds, of buying the cream as the three walked back to the college. No, that wouldn't do. It was beastly for people to see their host wrestling, up to the last moment, with the labour of entertaining them.

He drew a little closer to the other two, to make his excuses. Neither of them seemed to hear him at first: they were not talking, and yet they were absorbed, as if thoughts were passing between them better than by means of words. A sharp sense of being outside, and unwanted, hurt Auberon. But he could not stay there, hanging around the closed gates of their privacy. He touched Victor's arm.

Victor turned slowly; Molly more quickly, her face aglow

with kind compunction. Molly's face had always been like that when she had been roused out of any little reverie of hers, to find Bron wanting something. Oh, he knew that touch—the maternal—the womanly business—the feeling women had that a moment's attention not given to a child's appeal was guilt and confusion. He said he "had got to mess around for a bit"—would they come straight up to his rooms after the race? Then he slipped off the barge and away up the avenued walk to Christ Church and the city.

III

The woman in the little dairy shop had been amused at Auberon before; he had not minded carrying a tiny milk-can, all unwrapped, through the streets. She wondered now at the big flannelled figure. Not down at the river! How she wished she could be at that centre of things! Well, he must be a queer one.

From the shop to St. Mary's he walked through streets almost empty; colleges and houses had been drained of their occupants by the suction of the day's spectacle. The very roses looked world-forgotten that nodded at his open bedroom window, over the silent Fellows' Garden and the river meadows beyond. As he stopped to smell a rose there came sleepily booming, from out of the shimmer of heat that winked lazily over the distant starting-place of the race, the sound of the five-minute get-ready gun: slowly the big blunt sound shouldered its way, like some gentle giant, through the scent-crowded air that hung heavily over the low water meadows: they looked almost dazzled to-day with their own flaming floor of multitudinous buttercups. The Skimmery crew would be shoving out now from the bank—the happy fellows, about to burst into their five rapturous minutes of peace and joy past all understanding. Probably they would be thinking him rather a beast not to

e down there at the start, holding the watch, ready to measure them out the critical ten seconds before the last gun flipped them from the leash—he that had failed them already by not rowing himself. Would they think, "He might have shown a little interest"? What stools and stools there were to fall between!

He decanted his cream with much care, held a final review of the whole provision of cakes, scones and the like, and made, after deep thought, a slight change in the lay-out of the many flowers that he had bought in the market early this morning in honour of his visitors. Then all was done that man could do, and he sat down on the broad cushioned seat running round inside his big-bayed oriel window, to wait.

This oriel looked into an inner quadrangle. So it was only as something drowsier than the five-minute gun that the boom of the one-minute gun came to him now, muffled by the intervening masses of masonry. The eight would be all ready now for the start; bow and two would be holding her up to the stream; the wee cox, all wariness, shrillness and gumption, his starting-rope in his left hand and both rudder-lines in his right, would be scoring every lawful inch for his men. Auberon jumped up and opened his bedroom door, to hear better. How he had loved that last minute, when rowing! Nervous? Why, they were the least nervous minutes in life—nothing to choose or arrange or decide; only the deep happiness of the fit body waiting to let itself go and feeling it could bend the world.

The dull gun boomed again; and then, quick in the wake of its muted bass, there came a little puff of shouting, weak and remote, but suddenly deepening the cloistral depth of silence in the empty college. Across the hot stone of the quadrangle's opposite wall an afternoon shadow was creeping; over the warm short grass a pinnacle of the chapel threw a

slowly lengthening spire of a darker green; two sparrows hopped about in this solitude, giving by turns a twitter and then a few hops and a sidelong glance of enquiry up at the strangely uninhabited buildings. The place which Auberon was soon to quit had put on the heart-searching charm that invests every human haunt or construction from which the high tide of life has ebbed away—gardens long played in by children now grown up or dead, the dusty flowers left after a ball, or old broken arches of stone shining white in sad sunshine across silent fields.

The faint noise of the distant shouting rose a little as the crowd of men running alongside the boats came nearer and grew more eager. The sparrows cocked their heads to listen: the boats must be coming up out of the Gut, into sight from the barges; Molly and Victor would now be gazing down-stream, close together, linked in the same thrill.

IV

Auberon must have fallen a-musing rather deeply; for he was only roused by the first footsteps and voices of people coming back to college from the river through the extremely resonant tunnel-like passage that led into this back quad from the front one. Once roused, he fastened his eyes on the dark mouth of the tunnel. At any time now that arched frame might hold Molly, full length, a white figure clear on an almost black background of shadow: he must not, on any account, lose that sight of her. Many other dresses, quite unmagical, rustled through the arch, with little noises of silk rubbed on silk, and flitted off to other men's rooms. And then at last Molly was framed in the arch.

Far off as he was, he saw in her face that what was to happen had happened since he left her on the barge. She was transfigured; taller, more columnar than ever, as though the body had sprung up to match some new exalta-

tion within. But her face was the most wonderful thing. A kind of pensive radiance filled it, a lustre of beatitude; through the lamp's beautiful walls there glowed the new flame that lights and warms the spirit of a woman in whom the great annunciation has come to a clean, unsquandered heart?

He went to meet them at his door. But Molly came alone. A don who, like all the Skimmery dons, had idolised Victor, had caught him in the quad, and Molly had slipped on, up the stairs. Auberon met her at his "oak," or outer door, where the shadowy turret stair seemed dark after the outer sunlight. Her dazzled eyes missed a step and she stumbled forward a little, catching the hand that he held out to steady her. So they came into his room, he backwards, leading her on, with his face to her, seeing her well. Why, he had seen nothing, just now, when she stood in the arch —nothing to what he saw now of the intensity of life and joy that seemed to disengage themselves from her features— as if the very envelope of flesh were wearing thin and the delighted spirit shining through, unashamed of its ecstasy.

For a moment Auberon's breath was taken away, as he stood holding her hand; he had to lower his eyes, like one dazed. So that was what a perfect woman happy in her love was like!

She looked at him kindly and rather appealingly. Was she wanting to tell him, but not quite finding the words? He got up some sort of a brotherly smile and began as if something outside him were choosing absurd things for him to say: "Sister Ann, sister Ann, what do you see? You look gay." There, somehow, the playfulness stopped and he just said, still holding her hand, "O, I know," and they had no more need to explain.

"You're glad, Bron?" she almost begged, in great haste, with her eyes shining unbelievably liquid and dark from

under the roses of her wide hat. "Say you're happy about it. You know I won't let it ever take Victor away from you."

He dropped his eyes before the searching honesty of hers. "Vick," he said, "is the only man fit for you in the whole world." He bent down as he made her this gift, and kissed the back of the hand that he was holding.

It brought his head below her face, and Molly stooped and kissed his brown hair, and saw nothing.

V

They dined at the Mitre Hotel, where people have been dining now for some seven hundred years with only the thickness of a window between their shoulders and the perpetual stream of gowned and ungowned walkers who brush past in the street.

The wide low room was festally full; lamps were already lit, but the blinds still undrawn, and day lingered outside; in the gay mingled light the talk at the many tables began to buzz blithely. Auberon's table for his guests was so close to one of the shallow broad bays of glass that the rub of shoes on the pavement outside came to him every time like a whisper conveyed up his spine: each unknown wayfarer hurrying past set a very faint shadow flitting across the white table and Molly's fair dress and then vanishing swiftly—"As much to us as each of us is to Oxford," Victor said with his elegant light melancholy. "As the leaves come and go," he quoted, with other apt tags. He knew how to quote unbookishly, and to play the gentleman more than the scholar; he used such things like shades, prettily figured, to beautify the light of festal candles.

Auberon had no power of taking his ease in Holies of Holies. The old lines came new and unbated to him; yes, like a flitting of insignificant feet past a window, so had his

youth passed, idle and void. But away with this musty musing about his own scrubby affairs: he was a host to-night; at the moment now drawing dreadfully near Molly must not go away with any memories that were not jolly ones of this her great day. He screwed himself up to his job; he called them "young people," and drank to their very good health with a fatherly and benedictive air and some confidential touching of glasses; he chattered, as he had hardly done in his life, about a lot of old things of which he knew little—about the Skimmery men who were going to Ulster to fight in the Long Vac.—they were trusting to Carson to bring off his great civil war before the Michaelmas term; and about the queer tales Colin had from his father of rich Germans who were not going to the Alps this summer —and German officers who were getting no leave, and what not?—Gad! it was a gay old time, with every one wanting to set about somebody else.

Victor was kind to Bron's little conversational efforts. And Molly followed their talk lightly, only throwing out a few words now and then to help old Bron along.

Over Carfax Tower a single star was gemming a sky still faintly flushed when the three came out of the Mitre to the big open car waiting without. Colin, it seemed, had dined where Mrs. Barbason had, and she had brought him on: he stood now on the pavement receiving debonairly one of her point-blank discharges of robust counsel. "Never mind the old books," she was shouting. "See life—every bit of it—like a man—like your father I don't mean, get drunk every night."

Colin smilingly promised to fight against the temptations of study. Then he turned to the ancient inn door. "Ah, here," he said, "are our young friends."

Mrs. Barbason frankly preferred to sit beside her chauffeur; her old toes, she said, liked the engine's heat after

sundown; Molly and Victor must sit together, behind; "You've the hot blood of youth for your feet," she said. She looked at them sharply.

Molly turned in time to wave a hand before the firm curve of the street sheared the car out of their sight as it swept around to Magdalen Bridge. Auberon had stood fast on the kerb, awaiting that wave and returning it eagerly. Colin watched him with good-humoured patience.

They walked away, Auberon flat and silent in the emptiness that now remained; he forgot even to smoke. Colin was silent too for a while; he had tact; doubtless he had read the case at sight, life being his favourite book, as Mrs. Barbason advised. "So?" he presently said.

The word must have conveyed a good deal, for its size; for Auberon's answer was, "Yes, they're booked, right enough."

Colin put his arm through Auberon's. "Do we go hang ourselves?" he said. "Or is it billiards, billiards, while the night is young?" His voice was very friendly.

Auberon stoutly said No: his schools were to be on in a week; he must go and mug up the stuff.

Colin commended this resolution. His own schools, he said, were not due for a fortnight: "So I have time to turn round." He said good-night and departed to some jovial haunt, perhaps to rouse the night owl with a catch.

VI

Auberon walked on towards Skimmery. Nearing the gate he checked, and stood still, feeling how indescribably empty his room was going to be, after its glorious fullness five hours ago. He turned and walked along, aimlessly, into the shadowy Turl, where he had walked on his first day in Oxford, and out across the Broad into the leafy arcades of St. Giles. Everywhere figures flitted about in

the dusk; the cool air was awash with voices and little laughter from people at ease after the day. He had always liked that, but what good was it now? The visionary light was gone—it must be shining now at—where? He looked at his watch. Yes, about the top of the Chilterns by now; fleeting between the old Nettlebed houses, the car would be throwing about the wild shafts of light from its headlamps or sliding down the long slope through beeches and then along the Fair Mile into Henley. He saw the little surging lift of the car to the bridge; and the broken lights on the water below. He had to walk about, faster and faster.

About the time when the last deep blue was out of the sky, he stopped for a moment, near the Martyrs' Memorial. A ring of Salvation Army people were winding up their outdoor service with a hymn that they were always singing. "I do believe, I do believe," came its refrain, with the hackneyed words made insistently joyous, as if they had only just been hit upon, to give tongue to some sudden passion. The singing women looked almost exhausted with standing, and yet radiant, being possessed, beyond all sense of fatigue, by an absorbing fervour. Yes, these people had got hold of something, say what one might; they had made fast; they had done with drifting; they rode steadily at their moorings. Perhaps they saw Christ all the time as he had been Christ for a few weeks after he first went to church, as some one heartrendingly dear, to weep and work and wear oneself out for.

Something had got to be done. He couldn't go on like this, whining inwardly over his failures. It was too shabby. An old longing invaded him once more, not to be always one of the petty, worthless potterers and shirkers. To loaf and cadge till one died, never once to have stood up to life, all the time—it was too scrubby. He hurried back to

Skimmery, got out his books and sat down to work, head down to the table, among the flagging flowers left from the afternoon's festival.

Never had it been so hard to keep his mind jammed up against the meaning of what he read. Word by word he read it doggedly, but no meaning would come. He had heard of the dodge of sponging the head with cold water, to make oneself read with more profit. He went to his bedroom and did it and then stood for a minute or two at the window, looking out over the mist-blanketed meadows.

The peace of the sylvester night was perfect; he felt he almost could hear the purr of the car as it licked up the long Maidenhead street and threaded its way between the less continuous lights to the bridge; again the bespangled sheen of the Thames would be under their eyes; at Boulter's Lock, on their left, a lantern would move about as it swung in the lock-keeper's hand; it would shine with the enigmatic beauty of lanterns carried about in the night. He worked out his vision; he thought of points of the compass; yes, Victor might now be seeing Molly's face engraved in profile on a sky just growing luminous where the moon was rising behind Dorney and Burnham. He turned from the window and sat down again to flog the straggling mind back to its job. It would not come.

Well, at least he might put in the time, stowing dates. Last term he had made out a list of the Roman History dates that he must really know before the exam. Dates did not need understanding. Dates could be learnt by heart on the march. He took out the list and walked about his room, repeating internally all the dates he could remember and trying to cram up the others.

It went pretty well for three or four dates; then, without any previous sense of having lost hold, he awoke, as it were, with a start from some state of himself in which the big car

had been traversing Slough, now all abed, and crossing the sluggard Colne and speeding past the cavalry sentries at Hounslow into the slattern town of old inns and highwayman legends. Clearly the only way to get on with his work without these breaks was to keep on repeating the dates aloud and never stop; then he would know when he was beginning to moon and maunder again. He did it, taking great care to look instantly at the list, the moment the sound of his voice ceased at a forgotten date. On that plan the night's business ran on pretty well till the car that was running alongside slowed down a little, left the main London road and struck off southward along the silent and tree-shaded by-road to Gistleham, to drop Molly at home. She would go straight to his father, to tell him her news; he would be in the study; his head and shoulders were black in the little luminous circle round his one reading-lamp; he rose as she came in.

Confound it! Auberon's voice had stopped, for ever so long. He supposed the only way to get anything done, with this rotten old brain that he had, was to keep his hands moving hard, the whole time. Yes, manual labour—that was the tip. He took some ruled exercise paper and sat down to write out his list of dates over and over again, like a boy's imposition at school. Then at last he worked on, without further break. His mind could be anywhere now, doing anything, or nothing, while the pen drove on. Not the faintest image arose before him of the thrilling figure he had seen in his boyhood, shouting orders at the ford, as he wrote again and again, far into the small hours: "Cæsar invaded Britain, B.C. 54." With some assistance from unreciprocated love, the education most highly reputed among the Englishry of Auberon's class had fairly completed its work on him.

BOOK FIVE

CHAPTER XIV

I

IT had struck five on the last afternoon before the world broke, and the sun was now going down on a number of things besides landscapes. Twilight soon, and Hesper would light up the lamps of the sky for the last evening's reign of the British gold pound over all the pleasant places of Europe: Mürren, Marienbad, Venice, Cortina—its bright orb had reigned regally throughout them, levying for us islanders the kindly fruits of the Continental earth.

The old England, too, the one that was still feudal at heart, had come to her death-bed at last. Only six or seven hours now and all her ancient belfries, from Winchester up to Durham and Carlisle, would be tolling their twelve strokes apiece for her passing. She died hard, the glorious old jade. A little wicked in her time, and now wizened, she lay handsome to-night, with the fine bones showing well through the skin that was turning to wax. At any rate for what was left of that lustrous Tuesday in August, people would stay in the classes to which it had pleased God or some other authority to call them; cows would stand still to be milked; ale would be good at twopence a glass; and all the young men whom you liked would remain alive, with two arms to them each, and two legs, to employ in such tranquil pursuits as lawn-tennis in sunny gardens over the shining waters of the Thames, if it were their blest portion—or else to stretch them on hot turf among roses, as Victor and Auberon did at this moment, utterly at peace, as it still seemed, with all men and the gods, in spite of the current talk about war.

An airman flying over the Chantry lawn might have seen them as two white figures crucified on a green board—their

flannelled arms as well as legs lay out so straight and loose in a yawn-like ecstasy of idle extension. Both lay face upward; Auberon, the more rudimentary organism, was merely blinking luxuriously up at the sun, like a cat engaged in its devotions; Victor, the civilised connoisseur of sensations, had closed both his eyes and was now appraising justly the sun's effective way of suffusing the living flesh-tints of his eyelids, as seen from within, with an exquisite and luminous rosiness.

Sated with this exercise of the critical faculty, Victor moved his head slightly, half opened his eyes, and proceeded to feed his fine sense of colour and form on the gracious river frontage of the Chantry. "Bron!" he presently called, in a voice lazily low and yet as clear-edged as cut glass.

But Bron was entranced in the mystic reverie of all basking cats. Victor forbore, for some seconds, to break in on this ecstatic torpor. Then he called gently again. "Bron! Goodman!"

Bron emerged from the depths. "Speaking?" he said.

"Who built this amiable house?"

"Father might know," said Auberon vaguely. Then, pulling himself together, he attempted greater precision. "Some mediæval josser, I fancy."

"Clearly," said Victor. "And rather a latish one. Some genial soul—I mean josser. He must have felt rather chirpy—feeling the Middle Ages were thawing out now and a fellow needn't live in a fort any more."

Even their tongues relapsed into indolence. A drowsy cooing of doves came from the region of the stables; vapourous gold-dust floated dreamily over the gilded path that ran along the river from under the sinking sun to their half-closed eyes; over all the visible interfusion of garden, field and river a mellowness that was not yet definite seemed to brood; not exactly the first film of autumnal embrownment;

only a kind of pervasive premonition that this was at hand; a few days, a few weeks, and the whole picture would begin to attain its deepest unity under that rich and soft varnish.

Victor's silent gaze approved it all. The atmosphere was Tennysonian, even Virgilian; it came up to the mark; it set off well a landscape emblazoned with so many emblems and marks of the ancientry esteemed by people of culture. Incipient autumn, the delicate fey air of impending decay, sat well on those distinguished deposits of Time's, themselves decaying with an august composure; it helped to keep Gistleham well up in the same rank as muskily fragrant old tapestries, worm-eaten windmills that rust on ancient fields of battle, and sacring bells of fine metal worn smooth by celebrant hands in Umbrian churches before the Reformation was thought of. Just the place for a man's bride to come out of—a jewel like those that kings get, to put in their crowns, from the mouldering treasure-chests of Moguls who lost, long ago, everything but their fame. Decidedly, Victor approved.

II

For a good twenty minutes nothing was said. Then Auberon turned his face sideways, just enough to see Victor's. "Hi!" he said cheerfully. "Vick!"

"Sir?" Victor answered, patiently. Poor old Bron, of course, would say nothing new, nor anything to the purpose. Still, even that rudimentary system of impulses and reactions had its quaint charm. So Victor answered patiently.

"You're doing a fat lot of chat," Auberon chid, with no trace of real reproach in his voice.

Victor could have foretold the actual words. Had they not played together on nursery floors? When they had played apart for a while, in those earliest days, each absorbed in his own toys, and all was going well with Bron's play, Bron would come across now and then to touch Victor's

rm and say "Friends?" before re-immersing himself in his own privy joys. The words might be different now, but he sense of them was the same—just "Friends?"

Victor murmured forbearingly, "The unruly member, you know," and the silence settled in again. Sunshine and peace soaked into their senses, minute by minute, Auberon adored the sun while Victor's eyes rested on Auberon lazily, "Bron!" he presently breathed.

"Speaking?" said Auberon.

"May I say there are points," Victor said sweetly, "at which you resemble Cologne — I mean the notorious Cathedral."

"Don't know the institution," Auberon said. A sporting life had made an untravelled man of him.

The audible overflow of Victor's indolent reverie trickled melodiously on. "The thews, the stature, bulk and big ssemblance of you both! The might without magic!"

Auberon gave a small, friendly grunt. This, too, Victor could have foretold. And he knew what it meant—that of course Vick was a scholar and a wit, so that a fellow couldn't ell what on earth he was at, but still he was all right—no harm in his chaff.

Victor's word-carving voice trailed languidly on, muted nd yet clear, like a flute heard across fields that drowse in nidsummer heat: "Of course God made the one, and the Devil the other. Still, both of you are temples not made vith hands. And neither of you much given to breaking out nto surprises—blossoms and lances and songs and new lights hrown into yourselves, like Reims and Amiens."

Auberon listened, nonplussed but unhurt. Old Vick was going it. Sure to be good stuff, too, if one could only make out. Then, of a sudden, Auberon's head went sharply ound like a terrier's when it hears a new sound. He half ose and gazed down the stream.

Victor dreamily marked Auberon's movement and drew it, too, into a place in his visual fantasy. "Both of you gazing out, over rivers and a fair champaign, at quarries from which you were digged."

"See!" Civil man as he was, Auberon had to interrupt, really. He pointed down-stream. "A heron! Feeding! From Penn Ponds. They fly over Richmond, high up. But why the deuce at this hour? It's like having dinner at three. See him? Wading. Off Misery Spit."

But Victor's head would not turn round to see the motionless fisher knee-deep in the stream. "Misery Spit!" he exclaimed softly, "you know every last touch of paint in this presentable landscape? By name?"

"Good Lord, no," said Auberon. "Quick! he's going."

Victor made no move. The big heron lifted itself, as if drawn straight up from the ground by a string from above, and winged slowly away for its distant home wood. The pomp in the west had grown richer now; its level glow burnished Auberon's face as he gazed into it; brown eyes, brown hair, brown skin—with this aureate benediction upon them he looked quite a respectable emblem of the brown goodness of harvest, its ripe nuts, apples and corn. "Vick!" he said, after mature consideration of the western sky.

"Thy servant listens," the higher being replied.

"The sun," said Auberon, "seems to know a good place when he's got it."

"Meaning——?" Victor enduringly asked.

"He hasn't budged an inch, for half an hour."

"'Time,'" Victor quoted, "'travels in divers paces with divers persons.'" He looked at Auberon with a touch of comic despair. Would Bron recognise the quotation? No, Bron never did recognise quotations. What good would it be to go on and chaff this unlettered parson of to-morrow about the slow ambling of time with "priests that lack Latin."

Thus is a man's good wit cramped by the sorry wits of his nearer. But Victor was quite patient about it.

Auberon went on gazing as due westward as a doating sun-flower till a tall fir-tree's topmost smudge of black impressionist brush-work began to infringe at last on the rim of the sun. The horizontal light was now peering into mysterious hollows and chinks that had been dark at midday, among the western boughs of trees. But warmth was not stinted yet; the old fire maintained its aspect of immemorial and secure benignity.

"Care for another knock-up?" Auberon asked. Three racquets lay about on the grass, among tumbled cushions and pipes and used tea-things.

"I am too busy," said Victor, "eating the lotus."

A dove cooing louder than usual blurred the last word for Auberon's illiterate ear. He made a great joke, for him. "Locusts?" he said. "Good work! Old Pharaoh ought to have found you a job."

"He might, with less delay, have employed John the Baptist, a specialist on that diet. No, Goodman, the lotus, the lotus." Softly did Victor upbraid the dunce. Then he let fall with a mellifluous languor the lines of the drugging lullaby:

We have had enough of action, and of motion we;
Let us swear an oath, and keep it with an equal mind,
In the hollow Lotus-land to live and lie reclined
On the hills like gods together, careless of mankind,
For they lie beside their nectar, and the bolts are hurled
Far below them in the valleys, and the clouds are lightly curled
Round their golden houses, girdled with the gleaming world,
Where they smile in secret, looking over wasted lands,
Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps and fiery sands,
Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying hands.

Auberon listened intently, his eyes widening. "Some poem, that!" he said at the end. Any decent poetry spoken aloud by some one he liked, would always work on him. Victor smiled: it was comic, almost touching, to see how Bron's ingenuous thoughts would fumble or plunge about visibly under the skin of his face, like live pups in a brown canvas bag.

Bron had grown restless; some unsettling thought levered him up on his feet. "Where the deuce is Molly?" he wondered aloud.

"At the Channings', I darkly suspect." Victor was tranquil as ever.

Auberon took in the idea. "That's right," he said. "At the 'phone." Thomas Garth had kept out of his house that instrument of modern unreserve. But Molly, in extreme cases, would borrow the use of it from a neighbour.

"This insatiate craving for news!" Victor murmured. "About the little breeze with the Germans, no doubt." While expectation of war had been convulsing the vulgar, Victor had smiled at it; wars never came, he told Molly and Auberon—only tall talk from politicians about them; everything was patched up somehow, at the last moment, in these patched-up and patching times.

Auberon's thoughts continued to work as visibly as a spaniel's. A very sympathetic person might have seen him pass through the reflection "Why the deuce didn't I twig in time and do it for her?" to "Odd if old Vick twigged it, and yet didn't go," and on to "Vick's all right, though, all the same."

III

The whole of that day had been still, and yet some reserves of stillness had been kept in hand for the evening. Now evening was bringing them up: she opened out plane beyond plane of the clear depths of soundlessness; hearing lost itself

n them. Victor approved: nature was making an honest ttempt to come up to Wordsworth's vision of a nun-like esper quietude; the lingering sun, glazed as tight as an ye full of dreams, was a quite passable Turner. But Auberon was perturbed; old Bron, as Victor noticed for the undredth time—always with a touch of intelligent amusement—was really like primitive man, or a horse, in face of nything unusual going on in the sky. The taut, precarious ensity of the silence seemed to make his ears prick, as if me instinct in him divined that this overstrained hush was nfested with something that must be minded.

How do approaching sounds do it? While still out of ange of the ear, do they traverse inner halls and outer halls nd room after room of the vacant mansion of silence before hey open its door and come out to you? It seemed as if at his moment there slipped across the outer edge of the circle f stillness surrounding Auberon and Victor an infinitesimal oise of rubbing. It swiftly cleared and took form as the ub and faint whine of the sole of a tennis-shoe pressed on a arquet floor by a quick walker. Before Victor had made ut that much, Auberon spun round to look at the house nd let go the word "Molly!"

The rapid steps within the house were now slowing down. or a few moments they stopped. That was strange. Why ould Molly, the most direct and forthright of persons, nger? But she did not linger long. Through a shadowy om and out into the level sunlight, the whitening figure merged into distinctness as a swimmer comes up from a ive.

Auberon had no tail to wag; still he looked, for the oment, drolly like a large dog whose master, now return-g, has been away from him quite long enough. Victor, alf-raised on one elbow, viewed his betrothed with com-osure, but still with sincere contentment. Yes—*vera*

incessu patuit dea: strong as it was, the expert critic felt he could fairly apply that half-line to Molly just then, Molly the white-shod and white-robed and white-souled, "divinely tall and most divinely fair." Her face, with its upper half in shadow under a wide, floppy Panama hat, was animated and troubled; all the brave red of each cheek seemed to have huddled together into its centre; encircled by a beleaguering whiteness; her lips had the hurt beauty of ruffled roses; and her eyes, with the shining black of the pupils enlarged and almost ousting the brown, had gleams like dark water moving far down between walls.

But, whatever her agitation, she spoke up like one who had bidden that tempter, sloppy emotion, get him behind her. Molly play-acted stoutly. She made and lifted a little horizontal fold in the front of her white skirt and said, with an air, "I carry here in my robe peace and war. Choose which ye will."

"Peace, by God!" Auberon mumbled, his eyes on the torment half-hidden in her face. The towns and ships of Victor's poetry were still flaming and sinking rendingly in his heart.

Molly viewed him gravely and then turned to Victor. "Now you!" she challenged.

Victor was not rent; he was calm; he could remember the cue. "Nay," he said; then he waited a moment, to hold her posed just as she was, in her tall animated beauty, for him to appraise, before he said lightly: "Nay, give us that which you will."

"Take war, then!" With a brave little flourish she let the white fold fall. "To-night! at midnight it begins." She turned away from them suddenly. "Oh! the dew on my racquet!" she cried. She walked a few feet, picked a racquet up from the grass and stood with her back to them, wiping its strings, still dry and warm with the unset sun.

Auberon's eyes followed her, dog-like, close at her heels. When she turned again he had taken his own hanky out nd was carefully wiping the bone-dry gut of his own racquet, s if there were need. She was contained when she rejoined hem, and yet a little different. Her eyes took them both n at once, like a mothering arm round two babies. For all er Hebe-like splendour of youth, she had at that moment he look of a being who, in a way, is always older and wiser nan man, since she always feels, when a man is endangered, ow short a time it is since he was crawling and crowing n nursery floors, guarded by women from falling into ne fire.

"Well, that does it," Auberon ruefully said. Then he ondered further and added, as dolefully, "That puts the d on."

Victor smiled at the comic insufficiency of the words. Young England," he murmured, "greets Armageddon." His own salute to the grand deluge was almost ready now. You must have seen what occurs as soon as a monstrous lue-bottle comes blundering and smashing into a competent ider's delicate web. Not for long is the cool-witted owner unned by the shock. As promptly as the spider the wits f Victor were now turning out to do the right thing by he hulking brute of a fact that had just come butting into is nicely ordered world—to wind webby bands of appro- riate phrasing about and about it; to tie it cannily down into armlessness.

You may use words as a means of approach to life's burn- ng heart; or as sheets of asbestos, fire-proof doors to put p between you and those central flames. Victor was ways for the asbestos. And now he excelled himself. He as first-rate. He poetised the smash till Auberon could arcely regret it any longer. He blew silvery bugles of eech that turned the whole thing into high romance. Our

poor little kicked ant-heap of a world took on, while Victor spoke, an epic grandeur. Stunned! No, no! Rather had we come to ourselves after long years of stupor. Greatness had found us out; we were cast, beyond all previous hope, for glorious parts, a superb adventure; at last the dazzling chance had come to us again, in a dull world, to take the leap of an exalted fate. Oh, Victor did it well.

His looks helped out the stirring effect. They authenticated all that he had said. When Victor was enlivened by saying fine things, a kind of effluent aura of handsome animation seemed to disengage itself from him and radiate round his head. And whenever this candle was lit in the comely lamp, Molly and Auberon could only glance, now and then, at each other's admiring eyes and tacitly swear a joint fealty. Here was great leadership; here was a tongue that could tell you just what you were feeling, before you knew that you had felt it; here was a captaining mind, moving far ahead of both of theirs; Victor, they felt, had faced everything; while he spoke they were like people who wake on a gashed liner in the Atlantic at midnight, to find the commander walking the bridge, all debonair, his plans made, his whole bearing and voice a reassurance and stay, amidst shaken certainties and under falling skies. The two humbler spirits glanced at each other, renewing tacitly their old vows of allegiance.

They were so much moved that at last they had to flop into bathos. When Victor had spoken splendidly for a while, Molly looked at the watch on her wrist. "Golly!" she said; "time to bolt. There are those people coming to dinner."

"I'll let the net down," said Auberon. He paternally waved the other two away to the house.

IV

Bert, being wise for his years, was head gardener now, and his last job each evening was to go down to a juicy river meadow beyond the garden and bring back to her night quarters the old white pony, on whose back Auberon and Molly had first learned to ride. Five minutes ago Bert had passed the lawn, on this errand. From somewhere down in the moistening grass of the meadow his tuneful whistling was now audible—very cool, liquid and blithe, as whistling sounds in a fine summer twilight after good days of sweat.

Auberon went towards the sound. He met Bert at the opened meadow gate, bringing Jessie along in a kind of embrace, her neck lightly folded under one of his arms. Bert's tuneful whistling ceased. The two young men talked gravely, minute by minute, the old pony shaking her head sharply round now and again and giving little petulant stamps with a forefoot: why should her two closest friends be keeping her from her bed? Once, while they were thus talking, Auberon irrelevantly stooped and kissed the little central whirl of hair on the pony's brow; as a child he had had a trick of kissing any beast that he met, and these caresses had cost him one or two bites; they had also drawn miracles of forbearance from cur dogs in the streets and from nursing mothers of blind kittens.

The strain on Jessie's patience ended at last. The conference broke up and Bert was lifting a hand towards his cap when Auberon checked it and they shook hands shyly and warmly. Bert passed on to the stables, almost hurried out of a walk by Jessie's little, short-stepped, eager half-trot. His melodious whistle did not pipe up again.

To reach the house, Auberon coasted slowly along two sides of the lawn, where flower-beds lay. At one, in which

a certain kind of dark red rose had always grown, he stooped to smell one bloom after another, taking in long, deep draughts of the scent, and then holding off to look again at the bloom and smiling a little. Out of this doating he was roused by the voice of Colin March singing at him comically from an open window:

> "If this young man contents himself with a floral meal too pure for me,
> Why, what a very pure young man this pure young man must be!"

Colin there already! By Jove, yes, it was dinner-time. Auberon fled in to dress, *ventre-à-terre*.

As he vanished into the house a faint stir of air, the first of that day, made the garden trees rustle a little, as audiences do at a play when some strain of attention has just ended.

CHAPTER XV

I

COLIN had brought his mother to dine with the Garths, and Claude had brought his. Claude, now on convalescent leave after measles, looked inxpressibly pink in the new skin conferred by that malady, nd his pale blue eyes, which still expressed little, did it o-night with more than their ordinary solemnity. "Claude s like a pyramid," Colin once said, "with a mouse buried n its innards. He's one mass of containment, with *nil* to ontain."

The Barbason dowager was in her glory to-night. The umes of war were well up in her head; her heels—to speak n a figure—were flying in the air. She positively shouted bout all the good things that the war would bring back to ld England—the social health, the true British grit, the iscipline of the nation. Had she not always predicted these lessings?—she appealed to her host. Had she not said, undreds of times, that a war would teach "Labour" its lace? She spoke as if the predicted crop were already ying about on the dining-room floor and impostors vere trying to steal it from her, the one prescient ower.

Oh yes, Garth reassured her. All her prophecies were n record. And then the prophetess explained how she ad come to be so right. Mere common sense, she said; othing more—merely using her eyes. "You see, a war s a pretty hard fact. No voting an enemy down. No ood going on strike against *him*. All these mobs of ours vill soon find their level, once they come under fire. Thank God, we'll have the nation's real leaders leading again." he looked round the table. Her look defied contradiction.

"They do tell me," Colin began, with a fine thoughtful

air, "that it's all natural leadership in the field—first an officer leads if he can, and then——"

"'If!'" Mrs. Barbason snorted.

Colin's eye rested demurely on Claude. "Oh, of course, the born leader of men——"

"Isn't every one of our class born to lead men?" the lady demanded.

"And what of my poor class?" Victor let himself murmur. His own good taste condemned Colin for poking open fun at female guys. That was cheap; it was the raffish March touch. Still, this woman's bawling about "our" class was a little too much, anyhow in this house. When Garths were setting up kings, or pulling them off thrones, tow-headed Barbasons were, no doubt, herding swine by the Elbe.

"My dear Victor," the widow rejoined robustly, "don't interrupt your inferiors. We know you're leagues above all us gaping rustics. Don't rub it in." She turned to Garth, on her right. "Talk to Lucy," she trumpeted, "while I collect myself and eat my dinner. I'm out of breath with being buffeted by these young bloods."

Lucy was Lady Wynnant, now on Garth's right. She instantly fell to, on her adult life's task of filling in the conversational crevices left between the pronouncements of more pushing talkers. "You do believe we'll pull through, don't you, Tom?" she bleated wearily to Garth.

"That's just," he replied, "what I asked our old ferryman, Brench, an hour ago, when he sculled me across. Brench is England, really—more nearly England than any one else that I know. He said 'We got to.'"

"That's it, Sir," Auberon let the words go, like a held breath, before bethinking himself not to lay down the law, with all these fine strong minds about, to do it better than he.

Molly threw him a quick look and nod of assent. So did his father, before going on, to Lady Wynnant, "Of course you might say that Napoleon had 'got to,' before Waterloo."

Mrs. Barbason had recovered her wind. "No upstart has got to," she ruled. "Defeat is his *métier*. Not that we've much to boast of—letting puny thrusters like Asquith play the deuce with the land and the Church and the Lords and the Army and Ulster."

She paused, and the wan peeress wailed, just to fill in the chink in the talk: "Yes, yes, there has been weakness."

"Worse," Mrs. Barbason boomed. "Think of that bastard Haldane!"

"Oh! oh!" Garth murmured, in mock-Parliamentary protest, "Haldane thinks how to win wars. If we get an army over to France in time to do any good, it's he will have done it, more than any one else."

Mrs. Barbason's face assumed much the same look of despair as Garth's proceedings had brought now and again into the faces of his party chiefs in old days. Yet he was awesome to face. "I'd sooner trust," was all that Mrs Barbason dared to say, "the God of Battles than that man."

II

Massed on Molly's right and left, at the other end of the table, the four young men sat, for the most part, silent in the shadow of their elders' conversation. Auberon's face was full of serious attention, like Molly's; Claude's was null and void; Victor's was contained and seemed to reserve judgment; Colin's twinkled impishly—once or twice his amused eyes sought Victor's, during the Barbason's harangues, but Victor was not communing with any Colins just now; Colin was not quite the thing, except, of course, in smoking-rooms or after the women were gone. That raffish March touch!

The little snub would not pain Colin, I fancy. Was not Victor's Olympian reserve one human absurdity more, to enjoy? Quite a dainty one, too—more delicately flavoured than the grotesqueness of Claude, now raising a solemn voice in the chilled silence left by Garth's failure to strike the right note. "What I want to know," Claude asked, "is—what are we going to get by this war? When it's over, you know. Of course there's all this saving of France and civilisation *et cetera*. But, seriously——? When we get down to business——? What's it to be? Heligoland back again? Or a few German colonies? What do we *get*?"

"Oh, I suppose," Victor purred, "the same as we get from anything else—just the feel of it. What the wasps get when you poke a stick into their nest. Thrills, you know. Harps in the air. Vibrations. Escape from eventlessness."

"The event's there, right enough," Claude grunted. He hated this cobwebby stuff that Victor would sometimes spin round him.

"Yes, but are *we*?" Victor suavely persisted. "Our retinas well polished up, for taking impressions? Ear-drums properly tightened to hear the harps in their pianissimo passages? All of us quite equipped as we should be to take in the savour of any strange thing that may come?"

Victor spoke slowly, lazily teasing the poor pink materialist, as it were, with tickling blades of long grass. Auberon knew it was only Vick's fun, but weak good-nature sent Auberon floundering in to the victim's relief. "Not much catch," he said, "in taking in the savour of a licking."

"Oh! my *dear* Bron!" Victor sweetly upbraided. "Not see how fine a storm is? Draw in our feelers, like snails, the moment they touch something splendidly hard?"

Lady Wynnant hardly ever said things for any interest they had of their own. She said them to caulk conversa-

tional holes, or to change the bowling. "There's one thing," she mournfully said, when she saw that the gravelled Claude stood in need of a diversion. "The Navy is all right."

Garth began to measure out as much assent as his inner knowledge would permit. "It has manners," he said. "I believe it has discipline too, except among some of the admirals."

"It has ships," Mrs. Barbason boomed in, "in spite of the Radicals."

"The right ships?" Garth asked. "Or only the ones the Press screamed for? Of course I don't know about navies."

He knew enough—if others could know it too—to reduce to whimpers of terror that confident buzz of "The Navy's all right, anyhow," which went rustling round the British Empire that night. He all but knew what must come—the vaunted super-ships in flight from the besetting enemy sharks—bundled away into secret sea-lochs, defenceless if the enemy's blundering scouts should ever get the use of their eyes. He knew enough, too, to picture the scene going on in the War Office to-night—the wild rush for every good job on the staffs of higher commands, the pulling of wires and the mobilising of influential friends, some of them women. Still, he felt, quite sincerely, "What do I know?"—like Montaigne, who knew more than most.

A jar may hold water well and yet may convey—perhaps by some faint darkening of its exterior—the fact that there is a liquid in it. Garth made no revelations by anything that he said now, and yet a formidable significance disengaged itself from him. He did not pour it out; it perspired through the glaze of his reserve.

To the nurslings of fortune who listened to him to-night, war had meant little more than one of the meets that had

been arranged now and then for our army to hunt parties of troublesome "natives"—at most a band of embattled Dutch farmers. Seldom, within the memory of the middle-aged, had a thousand English been killed in one battle—and then it had seemed almost outrageous, as if foxes had taken to biting masters of hounds. The real thing, the grand hazard and test, with everything in the pool, had been for our dwarf enemies only; ours was the milder experience of little princes playing in gentle games of football got up for them always to win.

Garth's actual words do not matter. Something not the words, some subtler emanation that he shed round him, worked like the kind of rain which seems to wash the air and gives almost morbid visibility to distant points in a landscape. With that rare and arresting clarity some of the perils of our State were beginning to emerge when Mrs. Barbason struck in firmly to restore the event of the day to its proper place as a new incident in the old party squabbles that she loved. "You bet your boots," she counselled, "Lloyd George's Budget encouraged the Germans to this. And that man Redmond comes in somewhere, too. All the pack of them. Yes, my dear." The three last words were said to Molly, now shyly trying to catch the two elder women's eyes, for the departure.

Both Colin and Victor, each in his way, could enjoy the courteous gravity with which the three Garths, each in his or her manner, listened to the good woman's tirades

III

"Well, I suppose," said Claude, when the women were gone and the four younger men had closed up towards the host's end of the table, "they'll be mobilisin' the Ter-ry-tor-yul Army." He drawled the two last words with a facetious imitation of a Cockney twang. Two Regular officers had

lately been making a little money by drawling them thus in the refrain of a song that they sang at the music-halls.

Garth replied pretty drily: "That *is* the idea, I fancy." Absurd women were one thing; any rasping false note from a man was another.

Claude perceived no rebuke. "To guard a canal in the Midlands?" he said in a tone of ostentatious lack of interest in these scarcely military affairs.

"Or in Egypt," said Garth. "Or in Flanders." After each suggestion he searched Claude's vacuous face for some ray of intelligence.

None appeared. "Bit of a risk, Sir—wouldn't it be?" was all that Claude said.

Auberon listened intently, wanting to know; Colin with eyes cast down lest they should betray his gay enjoyment; Victor, perhaps, with some sensation more mellow. Each of us carries about, I suppose, his own set of X-rays or Y-rays or whatever his special illuminant is: one set, it seems, will pierce through everything else and show only what is sound in the people it plays on; another set will ignore all the rest of the structure of these objects and fasten upon their comic ingredients alone; a third set may pass unobservantly through both of these components and fix exclusively on something else—perhaps on the way the creatures live most of their time like deserted children, shut up alone with fears of things that will never happen and great plans which will not come to pass. Victor had no rays that would go very deep, but his had a great knack of showing him the outsides of fine things, the bloom on the face of spirited actions, the lustre and choice glaze of the surfaces of virtues and traditions. And now the connoisseur in him was soothingly fed.

The hour was kindly: it hung ripe and soft like a fruit; and every one had been decently good in his part—for these

poor times; even the mountebank Colin had been less jarring than sometimes. As to Garth—what an Old Gaunt he was! A genuine piece of the most austere carving in oak! Why, the old Spartan had almost done the impossible—scared Mrs. Barbason out of her stuffy obsession of spites. And then how divertingly had those darling rancours of hers crept back and refilled her soul, like the muddy water that children try to sweep out of a puddle with brooms; it comes draining back. Molly and Auberon too, the well-bred worthies, making no show among parrots and monkeys, but still somehow right, with their low-toned lustre of gentle race worn unconsciously and humbly—Molly especially, Molly all flushed and troubled, with dark fires alight in her eyes when her father had talked like the Last Trump, as if the war were lost or won already, according to what we had done or not done long ago, and she had broken out with "Oh, Father, it can't be so past-tensey yet. Can't people who're drowning be saved, whatever they've done, if other people have courage?" And Claude, our droll shield and defender, Bellona's pink bridegroom, the kind of brain we were putting against the prize pupils of Moltke and Clausewitz. All these had something of colour or vehemence.

The scene was good enough, too; it had composure and glow; the honest, attentive Garth faces darkling down from the walls, the paint of them sombre with age and yet contained animated with all the light that it had drunk in during the centuries; the big embayed French window faintly luminous still, and, visible through its uncurtained panes, a last russet flush still warm in the north-west; and the river, far down in its bed, shimmering with reflections of starlight. All like some play of fair quality, for the period, acted in front of a handsome back-cloth of old tapestry, with the sheen of romantic mail armour glimmering through some green forest gloom.

Victor felt no fear. New Year's Day might find Englishmen ranging along with Arabs and Spaniards and Greeks in that queer outer darkness inhabited by losers of old empires. Victor had said so himself, just before dinner, to the intensely listening Auberon and Molly. But it was only so in a sense, a figurative, literary sense, as you might speak of that future New Zealander musing over the bones of a dead London. When had national danger, defeat and decay not been spoken and sung of, well or ill, by eloquent or windy persons? But miracles did not happen: scares and vicissitudes came, but each time the "practical" people bungled their way through, and the people of finer mind viewed each mess, as it was made and swept away in its turn, with the appropriate, unexaggerated emotion: but no miracle really happened; our world, apart from these redeeming efforts at comedy, was too prosaic even to tumble to pieces. So Victor felt no fear. The film that intervened between him and the shuddersome touch of things as they are was still whole and untorn; he could not even see, with any energy of vision, that Thomas and Molly and Auberon Garth were in the throes.

IV

The men did not sit long. When they rose, Auberon slipped across to open the bayed French window; he stood looking out from its threshold. "Taking a squint while we can," he muttered apologetically, on finding that Victor had come too and was eyeing him quizzingly. "It's flood," Auberon added, seemingly with deep joy in that periodic process of nature's.

"Flood——?" said Victor.

"A waterman's word," Auberon answered. "It means a new tide, only just beginning to make." He spoke almost shamefastly. Lore that you privately love may seem childishly homely when hauled out for the wise to inspect

"You feline Argus!" Victor gently exclaimed, "how can you tell, in the dark?"

"By the way the shine from the stars lies on the water. You see, the stream and the new tide are meeting. They jostle each other, to try to get past. So some little bits of the shiny water run up stream and others run down, and the shininess moves with 'em. In ten minutes or so the twinkling will all strike up river."

Victor was scarcely attending. He drifted out after the others. Auberon lingered a few minutes more to doat on those shifting and trickling patterns of silvery light bespangling the black waters. "Good old flood!" he muttered to himself, brooding and doating.

CHAPTER XVI

I

THE little party broke up early: that night a meal could just hold people together, but after the last mouthful no one could sit still and talk. The purposeful people found things to do; the rest could at any rate throw the common routine of their lives into confusion and give themselves the sensation of living at high pressure, hustled by mighty events.

Lady Wynnant and Colin had gone; the Barbasons were getting into their car; Victor was to have stayed the week-end, but those wayward rushes and swayings of the ineffectual crowd had involved him too; Joyce had telephoned from Shiplake, through the Channings, that she "couldn't stand being here, away from everything"—so she was motoring straight back to town and begged Victor to come too. She would call for him at 10.30. So Victor was now in his room, making ready to go, while Molly and Auberon, at the front door, watched the Barbason car receding down the brilliant green tunnel bored by its headlights through the high shrubs overhanging the drive.

That luminous tube and the black lump which seemed almost to block it diminished to a bend where tube and all instantly vanished, leaving behind the thrill of release that comes when the last cent of a social debt has been dutifully paid. Then Auberon eagerly slipped his arm under Molly's, gave hers a good brotherly hug against his own side and drew her along by the burrow-like path through the shrubbery flanking the house, into the open garden beyond, above the jewelled gloom of the river. "*Wasn't* he splendid?" he burst out as they walked. Clearly Auberon had borne hours of longing for this chance to speak out. "Simply tremendous!"

Of course Molly knew who was meant. "He," with no name mentioned, meant only one person in their talks. But Victor was now something of hers, and this made her shy about singing his praise. So she made an attempt to do the light touch: "Was he dropping pearls," she said, "while you smoked?"

"I don't mean then. I meant—what he said before dinner."

Molly breathed devoutly "Yes." Of course she had known what Bron meant. Her feint at the light touch was ended.

"Some lead, wasn't it?" Auberon said fervently. "Talk about pillars of fire! He's the man to be with in any old wilderness."

"Yes, yes!" There was no longer any reserve about Molly's Amen. The kind darkness, merciful to intimate thoughts, set her free to speak from the full heart.

"The part," he went on, "about all of us sticking together, like people at fires and wrecks."

"Yes!" she whispered, "yes!"

They were silent, perhaps for a minute. They were walking along the path nearest to the river. You must remember that they were very simple people. That any feeling could fire impassioned and beautiful words and not also fire their speaker to act in the spirit of those words—such a notion was beyond them. Auberon pressed Molly's arm closer to him. "You saw what it meant?" he said, gently.

"Yes—he means to turn soldier." She waited a moment. "And you, Bron?" she asked.

"Sure thing! Vick's tip will do me. Old Fulford's coming too. Look here; I got it just before dinner." He lighted a match and showed her a telegram—just "If anything doing, let me stand in. Fulford."

There was another pause, their thoughts marching ilently on, to the music of the massed murmurs and whispers of the riverain night—little noises of gulping, kissing and ucking from the infant tide as it swamped tiny hollows or crambled across pebbly flats; the stern roar from the listant weir; and a few more fortuitous sounds—the ringing ap-tap of a single pair of iron-heeled boots traversing the nushed village; the squeal of a girl loitering late with her over under the tow-path trees; then a little burst of singing rom an opened window of the inn—

"Land of hope and glory,
Mother of the free,
How shall we extol thee
Who are born of thee!"

The voices were men's, but with youth, the ecstatic nd tremulous spirit, a-stir in them still; the notes had the itiful beauty of all convivial singing when heard, as a God night hear it, from some outer darkness where he watches. The two listened.

"Brother Bert will be there," Auberon said. "He's in vith us, too."

"As an officer?"

"No. All of us privates—wasn't Vick clear on that?—vhat he said about nobody fussing about his rank at a wreck r a fire? He all but said, 'I'm enlisting, and won't you ome too?'"

Molly saw it all now. "Yes," she agreed. "And you ot Bert to go also? You have been quick."

"It seemed scrubby to have such a tip and not share vith Bert. He was always a good old ally—d'you remember?"

"I'm remembering everything, Bronkin. Oh! here he s."

II

Across the lawn from the house there was approaching the alternately rising and sinking glow of a cigarette puffed rhythmically by some invisible mouth. "'In such a night did Thisbe fearfully o'ertrip the dew.' Heavy dew too!" In the warm darkness Victor's voice made the delicate plash of a slender fountain jetting high in a still courtyard. He stooped to feel how wet his shoe was.

Molly ran to tug at his arm, to get him aside, away even from Bron: was he not going away in ten minutes—for ever, perhaps? When she had him alone she broke out, "I'm glad—nothing but glad—not afraid—only glad."

He looked down at her, questioning her upturned face. Molly had broken out before now in cries of passionate humility at the thought of having gained his love. At one of these times she had made him think of a pre-Raphaelite Annunciation, with its beautiful Virgin bowed under the sense of her glorious and unheard-of fate. Victor knew how to appraise such homage. It was a thing choice of its kind, like the August moon now rising and the changeful sheen of the mailed river and the elfin antics of the bats looping and twirling above and about, now lost upon a black background of shrubs and then rising clear to trace queer arabesques on the sky. But what, in particular, could be moving her now? "I am glad, too," he said, with just a seemly infusion of lover-like ardour.

She pulled at his arm. "Don't keep me out of your plans," she begged with a fond importunacy.

"Plans?" he said, very slowly, groping for some clue to this odd agitation of hers. His cool hand patted the hot and moist one that lay along his sleeve, with its fingers clasping a little at the cloth, as a bird's feet embrace the thing they rest on.

"Oh, don't!" she appealed. "You keep me standing utside." Then she changed her tone quickly, to show im how bravely light she could be. "Well, and when do ou ride away to the wars, you two soldiers? to-morrow?"

"To-morrow!" he echoed hollowly. The word was a here articulate gasp of dismay, and yet perhaps it was just vithin the power of fantastic generosity to construe it as the ffirmative answer that would have been made by any of hose who do not blow on a trumpet unless they are ready o fight with a sword.

For some moments Molly was perfectly silent. Then he spoke with her voice under perfect control. "Bron nderstood, at once, what you meant—before dinner. I idn't, at first—the part about your enlisting and not being n officer."

They walked on in silence for some moments more. Molly's hand, the one that had grasped a little at the surface f Victor's sleeve, lay motionless on it. And Victor, no oubt, had something to do—some thinking and piecing ogether, and some deciding. Enlist! Private soldier! What had all this staple stuff of melodrama to do with him? Oh, these Garths, these primitive, pragmatic Garths who ould never hear a thing said without asking, "What does hat lead to, in action? What must be *done*?" As if to *do* his and to *do* that were life's whole purpose, and perfect pectatorship were nothing!

And yet, how resist? Brute circumstance could not always e ruled by the wise. A current had set in; it had caught im; a turned tide was taking him swiftly along. And the rt of life had this, too, for a part of itself—to know when to ve in, with a good grace, to currents too strong to be emmed—not to strive or cry but to modulate yourself ftly from key into key; and always, always, to get your tonation ringingly right at the present time, whatever

might come of it. Besides, if he should say to Molly, "Oh, I was only just talking," what would he see in her face when they went into the house? The light utterly out in that beautiful censer which she had lit in his honour? That was not to be risked; better face anything future than that instant loss.

Silent still, they drew near to where Auberon sat on the low river wall. "Well, Bron," said Victor, with nearly all the serenity back in his voice. "Shall we e'en take the shilling to-morrow?"

Auberon humbly followed the lead. "A bob's always useful," he said.

And then, while they waited for Joyce's coming, Victor did justice to the occasion; he took light; he ran on; he met like a prince the demands of the case for words tastefully chosen. Auberon felt his own thoughts flowing clear in Victor's words; his own inarticulate impulse not to sit still under this collapsing sky, but to jump up and rush for something to do, and some one to do it with, took proper form with Victor there to phrase it. Molly was dead silent, dead still, except when she put up a hand to brush away from her face the webby tickle of the dew Victor had reached the very top of his form when they heard the peremptory horn of the expected car as it felt its way audibly down the embowered lane from the Great West Road to the house.

A maid came wading across the wet lawn, as it were upon stilts. Miss Nevin, she said, would not come in—she would wait in the car.

Auberon said, "I'll pay Joyce our respects," to give Vick and Molly their minute alone; they would not want him; they had one another: theirs was a garden enclosed and his place was outside its high walls. With the ache of that feeling there came a curious assuagement; not an anodyne;

just the reverse—a heightened awareness of everything round him, just as it was, and delicious simply because it was just what it was. Above the tunnelsome path, as he went round the flank of the house, he could just make out the line of a certain branch of an old walnut-tree. On it he had often sat when a boy, and now his old delight in the feel of its bark and in the angle it made with the trunk and the way that it dipped, farther out, and then lifted again, like a saddle, flooded back into him now; it was enough for things to be simply themselves and for you to be you and to have known them; then they were utterly lovable.

As he rounded the house to its front his eyes flinched before the great car's blazing lights. Even Victor had been slightly apologetic at first about the glories of that equipage of his people's; Colin said it invited the social revolution. But nothing was ugly to-night; not even showing-off or snobbishness; everything would be touching and pitiful if we could only see right into its timid and anxious little heart —really no worse than a small foolish child's.

With the glare still stupefying his eyes, Auberon could not have told at first that it was Joyce who sat withdrawn in the distant corner of the closed car. He made out a white shoe on the floor; above it, something rustled slightly —the rub of silk against silk; some jewel gleamed off and on; nothing more could he see, and perhaps the impersonality of a person who had to be thus inferred from scanty circumstantial evidence made his voice a shade less friendly than was its wont.

For Joyce broke out amazingly: "Why do you hate me so?" cutting short his courtesies. Joyce seemed to flame at him suddenly out of the darkness, with burning eyes, and no face visible round them, like a dog's eyes when it lies awake in a dark room: "As if I were some strange woman you

had to be civil to! Oh! I suppose it's the horrible pride you keep at the back of all your meek ways—you make people like you and want to be friends and help you, and then you—you show them the door."

"I'm frightfully sorry, Joycie," was all he could say, in his first consternation. He rummaged hurriedly through the drawers of his mind for some clue to Joyce's irritability. Why, of course—what a blind pig he was! Vick must have told her everything on the 'phone and she was upset and fretting for Vick. Well, it was natural. "Vick has been *fine* to-night," he said warmly.

"Oh, Vick, Vick, always Vick!" She shook the name off.

Auberon sagely recalled things he had heard about the indirectness of women. Of course she was worried for Vick. He went on: "He was tremendous. He showed us all how. He's fetching us all away to the war."

She leant forward. "You?" she said.

"And Bert. You remember friend Bert, in our garden?"

"Oh, Bert!" Again, the name was brushed off like a fly.

At the top of the broad, shallow steps a little stir was beginning. The door had opened: a shaft of light was thrown out; it traversed the gravel and went searching into the shrubberies beyond. In his wish to placate and comfort, Auberon had leant forward into the car, resting one hand on the edge of the seat Joyce sat on. The hand was snatched up by two hot, ungloved ones. "I was a beast," she said, low and eagerly. "Wash it all out, Bron—all my beastliness. God protect you!"

His hand was raised quickly, pressed to a warm cheek, and laid gently down, and Joyce, the next second, was hailing Molly and Victor, as they came down the steps, with the

hard, bright, educated chaff that was her usual working dialect. "And so

Marlbrouck s'en va-t'en guerre—
Ne sais quand reviendra!

Yes, Bron told me. *Mes compliments*, Molly. They'll wear your colours in their caps, your picture in their hearts." She kept it up in that vein till the great car took motion silently like a liner when its time comes to sever many friends.

Again Molly and Auberon stood watching a car that threaded its own burrow of light through solid-seeming verdure. "Joyce all right?" he asked, as they turned to go in.

"Joyce?" Molly said. She took nothing in.

"She didn't seem very square on her perch——"

"Who?"

"Joyce—you know how tremendously all-there she is, as a rule."

"Who?—Joyce?" Molly came a little way out of her reverie. "Joyce? Oh, my dear Bron, can't you see?"

No, he couldn't—so deeply ingrained was his sense of not coming up to the appointed standards. Nothing had ever set him on to study the fits and starts and little rushes hither and thither, in eagerness or pain, that give away the secret of the female creature when urged by nature to make some little push to bring off its own hampered choice of a mate. And Molly had sunk back again into her own reverie now. She said good-night to him absently, as she went off to her room and he to knock at the door of his father's study.

III

The elder Garth was bent absorbedly over a letter that he was writing; when his son entered he looked up as if only

half roused from thought; each hand kept its place on the blotter, the pen was lifted only just clear of the paper.

His son was for backing out, at the sight. "Sorry to butt in, Sir. You're busy?"

"Not a bit." The elder leant back in his chair. He was no longer a man interrupted. No surfeit had ever come to take the edge off his hunger for talk with his son.

"Vick told you," Auberon asked, "the game we have on?"

"No. But I guessed. He and Molly came to say good-night a minute ago. She had fear in her face." For a moment the two followed their thoughts without speaking, and then Thomas Garth said, "Is that it?" and Auberon nodded.

"Are you in it, too?" his father enquired.

"D'you mind, Sir?"

"Mind! It's age I mind—years—I never minded *them* before. I can't go with you, Bron."

"You're worth us all, Sir," Auberon was breaking out, but old habit put its brake on his tongue, and he was repossessed with sureness that all the big things in your heart can only remain at their best by being unsaid; once uttered, they have set out on their way to become mere phrases, the sentimentalist's soiled current coin.

His father looked glad that he had not gone on. They stole friendly looks at each other; they reconnoitred each other's shy thoughts. Two of these scouting glances collided and then Auberon made a rush to say something. "It was all Victor's idea," he said.

"Was it?" his father said, rather drily, and then paused, and began again: "How about Holy Orders?"

Auberon plunged: "Would you mind if I chucked the whole thing?"

"Hullo!"

" It's like this, Sir, I fancy I do believe in a kind of God, n a sort of a way. Just now and then, anyhow. I get a eeling that something inside me, or round me, is putting it o me straight that something has got to be done, for no other reason than just that this power or spirit, whatever it s, makes me feel it's the only thing in the whole world hat's really worth doing—and then the thing seems perfectly asy to do, however scaring and hard it might have seemed t any other time."

" That's God, all right," said Thomas Garth.

" It's all he runs to, with me. Then there's Christ. I lo believe, Sir, I've loved him—of course it's a big word to se, but I've really loved every Jack thing about him ever ince I first heard of his death and went off and hid in the hododendrons to blub. Whatever he said seems to grow nto being a bit of yourself, till you can't make up your mind vhat to do, in anything big, without thinking first, ' If I hould do this, would Christ bar me? ' "

" That's faith, right enough," said his father.

" Think so, Sir? It's all I can get, in that line. As to lot of the rest, I can't even feel that it matters. Fact is, t seems to let him down—making out, as it were, that all he lovely, noble things he said wouldn't count for so much f he'd been born the usual way and his body had lain still vhen he died. What d'you think, Sir? "

" That. I've thought it these forty years."

Auberon stared. Was it possible that his father and he hould both have been worrying out the very same things, ach shut up alone in a dark room, and no signals between hem? He warmed to the work and went on: " The jar s that God seems to me to be up against Christ, in all this var business. The one thing that I feel to be more worth loing just now than anything else in the world is for every oul in this island to stick tight together until we can pull

through this beast of a war. It's the same kind of sureness you'd have about what to do when a kiddy falls into the river. Not reason and proof and all that. Simply sureness."

"Yes."

"That's the God side of it—only it brings you right up against Christ. I've tried all I know and I can't, for the life of me, square any sort of a war with what Christ says about peace."

"Nobody can, Bron," his father said quietly.

Auberon marvelled again. Why on earth had he waited till now to break through the fence that had kept him away from this friend who had been having it all out in solitude, like himself? And now the time was short. He let himself go. "No good thinking, is it, Sir, that Christ was simply talking through his hat—about the other cheek and not resisting evil and all that? Of course he must have meant it, mustn't he?—that we were to let the Germans walk over us all and do what they like. I've tried to make out that he meant something else, but I felt my mind becoming slimy directly."

"It does," his father said. "It begins as soon as one wriggles."

"So I'm for denying him, honest, this time and fighting it out, and then, when we're out of this hole, we might see what can be done." Here a twinge of panic traversed the man of few words, who had spoken so many. Gassing away!—horrible thought. There was a note of deflation in Auberon's voice as he concluded lamely: "You see that I'm a bit of Mr. Facing-both-ways, I'm afraid, Sir."

That, too, his father understood—the inveterate "halfness" of life—its refusal to blow perfectly ringing and unqualified calls on its bugles. For nineteen years these two had been mutually receding, till each had become, to the other, almost an unexplored continent. To-night they

ere making landings, at last, on each other's unfrequented
ores and finding everything there familiar beyond expecta-
on. "That's how it goes, Bron," said Garth. "All
roken lights. Only one thing to do—to keep driving at
ction—putting out all your strength on something or other,
ot scrubby. It keeps you fit to get the feel of the great
oments. If only we could hold them when they come!
Vhy, we could keep the earth warm when the sun had
ooled down."

Garth's tone, as he said the last few words, grew lightly
vhimsical, shying away, as it were, from eloquence. Auberon
oved that half-humorous way of tailing off into bathos.
o be serious and yet to decline to mount any high horse—
seemed right and natural.

The elder man shifted his grasp of their only topic away
om the place at which it had grown a little too hot to be
ripped. "So you don't altogether hold," he said, "with
ur friend Clement Wade and his Pacifists."

"'Fraid I don't know their line, Sir."

"Well—Christ's—in a way. That we ought to love all
ankind too much to fight any part of it—say to the
Germans, 'Shoot, if you like, but we won't. You are our
rothers and we aren't Cains.'"

"Glorious—wouldn't it be—if only one could? If one
uld feel really the same about all the Frenchies and Germans
nd blacks that one hasn't seen as one feels about the good
ld life-like watermen here and the jolly chaffy crowd at
icket matches! Can any human bring it off, Sir?"

"What know I? Possibly." No doubt he thought of
Vade shuddering away from the sight and sound and smell
f an English holiday crowd and yet going through the
otions of hugging all humanity to his heart.

Auberon searched for some moments among the sensations
at he could remember. "I know *I* can't," he then said.

"Nor I," said his father. How could that cold abstract figure of universal love, commended by so many of the most loveless, make head against the warm affections of kind common men for people and things that feed their friendly senses and fill their passionate hearts? But he added: "Mind you, it has to come yet—the bigger love, or whatever it's called. It's no credit to us that it's not here already."

"That's right, Sir," said Bron.

"The only question is—what's the right way to it? Acting as if it *were* here already?—when all that we've got to, as yet, is some tepid thinking about it? Or keeping alive whatever spark of comradeship we have alight among the people in each country?"

"Number two, Sir, for me," said Auberon, full up to the brim with a heartening sense of something going on like a great dawn or a spring-tide of wonderful height—the swell of a huge, uncritical, unselfish impulse of companionship throughout an endangered nation that braces itself to hold together, for all it is worth, till it can see its way through. Thus far had man's love of man struggled, till now; it could warm humanity only by sections, as yet, and that with strange unlovelike conflagrations at times. It would warm all humanity evenly in the end; but not, perhaps, if that first, struggling fire were quenched. It might seem absurd, in a way, and yet it was shiningly clear to Auberon's mind—if all the internecine flames that were blazing up over half Europe to-night could be put utterly out by one turn of a tap there might be no bead of light left at all to kindle a friendlier fire at some happier day.

The two could now talk in the shorthand of friends; thoughts could pass from mind to mind on the wings of mere snippets of speech. No abruptness of transition mattered. "About commissions?" said Garth.

"The point don't arise," said Auberon. "Victor is for he plain thing. We've both always cut O.T.C.-ing. And Bert's coming with us, if you'll let him off, Sir."

His father nodded.

"You see, Sir——" said Bron, and there he pulled up, linching back from the edge of verbiage.

His father handed him the letter that he had been writing. Anything like that?" he asked.

While Auberon read, his father busied his fingers with ther papers, to make time and ease for the reader. The etter was to a fellow-member of the county's Territorial Association. Its point was that, now that the Territorials nust become millions, a break should be made with the plan f taking the well-to-do youth as a God-given officer and he less well-to-do as a private. This time the thing was oo serious, Garth wrote: we must rake in all the natural eadership we could find; a real war couldn't be run on ines of suburban gentility; better do the sane thing before ve had troops thrown away in the field by leaders who vere leading only because they were able to buy a mess kit.

Auberon read slowly. He relished the curt bareness and ith of the sentences, each trained fine for its job, with very fatty word sweated out. "Good work, Sir," he said t the end.

In both of them, at that moment, the risen waters of eciprocal kindness were pressing hard on closed sluices. One breath more of strength in some uninvestigated wind of he spirit and each of them would have owned, somewhat rokenly, that till now he had never seen the other as he vas. But habit held; the fastidious emotion shrank from he deflowering of its virginal pride of containment. The lder man had risen, and there they stood, second by second, nable either to speak from the heart or to break away from he sight of one another's eyes and bring to an end this

last possibility of speaking. While they stood silent, a little clock, with a round handle, that stood on Garth's desk, struck the half-hour, muted and small, from some recess in its vitals. That ended it as decisively as the bell that cuts short people's farewells when a ship is sailing.

"I think that's about all there is to it, Sir," Auberon said, and they bade each other their ineffectual good-night.

IV

You may remember the little notebook that was preserved by Thomas Garth in a drawer. He took it out as soon as Auberon left the room—the first time Garth had touched it since the morning after Follett came to the house. Dust had settled again on its shiny black cover: when he slapped it against the edge of the desk, motes flew thick in the lamplight. The pages were gummed together with old damp and immobility. He separated them carefully.

Yes, here was the living Bron, the little eager and wondering delighter in everything that fortune offered him. "Oh, Muvva, look! A bee tickling the gwass!" Bron on all-fours, on the midsummer lawn, wriggling with joy as he watched a bee walking awkwardly on the tips of the stubby blades of the mown grass; and Winifred running to look. Bron dancing in ecstasy round the autumn bonfire of leaves as it brightened towards evening, and chanting a kind of rapturous litany as he whirled: "O, fire burneth well! Fire burneth better than a lamp, because a lamp isn't so good. Fire burneth better than anything else. O fire!" Then Bron, entranced with admiration of Victor's talk, leaving his food uneaten to listen, and saying afterwards, "Fahva, the time simply fleds when a person's listening to Vick's compersations." And then Bron, flown with a pride that had to find vent, bringing his father a piece of wood rudely fashioned and saying gravely, "A weppin! A

stol! Isn't it deesunt?" And always at night Bron red, not sated, with the day's adventures, snuggling in to eep, with his sunset cry of "Fun to-morrow" and some gantic future plan almost visible in his heart. He that ad liked life so much was going to be killed.

Garth had almost no hope. Our jolly little sporting ars were over. This would be scientific killing, on the rand scale—a herding of millions of the young of Europe to model abattoirs, like the pigs at the Chicago factories. e read on. Yes, Bron had courage. "Whenever," one ıtry ran, "Molly jumps over anything in the garden, Bron ys, 'Bwon do ut,' and tries to jump it too, and generally lls. To-day he tried to jump the low rose-garden railing, me down and cut his forehead on a broken flower-pot." arth remembered that day, and Winifred holding the eeding child in her arms all the time, as if some one were ying to take him away, till the doctor came to sew up the sh—holding him and crying secretly above his head while e told the boy he would have to be brave, because it would ırt. After the sewing, Bron had seen her crying with rriness for him, and then he had said to her, "Afte wall, hat did the sewing-man do? Had a pencil and dwawed a w and a fish for me."

The words were written in Winifred's hand; and near em a note of a folly of Bron's. Garth had written it ultantly a week before his wife's death. "When I was the terrace this evening Bron appeared on high, on the ndow-sill of the bath-room. He was in his pyjamas and seate after his bath. The scamp just sang out, 'Catch e, Fahva,' when he saw me below, and jumped straight wn the fifteen feet into my arms. It took me all the cket I knew to field him. Folly, of course, but still nething like trust in a friend." And that was the comrade, ırth thought, that he had been letting go, these nineteen

years. A few strangers would have a good chum for some months, and then an end to it all.

When a friend dies we may see with more than normal clarity the now irreparable loneliness in which he must have lived, shut up with his small band of wavering virtues to stand the siege that is now over. Some such light was now gaining clearness in Garth while he stood beside the grave so swiftly dug for his son. How stoutly Bron had tried, in the early days when his father had known him best, to make everything out! On almost every page there was a note of some grave question of his—"Fahva, is a yard high, or long?" or, on a long walk, "Fahva, are we nearer home than we're not?" and then, later, "Fahva, is watching a kind of small staring?" And then, somehow, the questions had come to an end and Bron had been left to feel his own way—and no doubt had fallen down over and over again as he thus stumbled along in the dark and picked himself up as well as he could and stumbled forward again, quite alone.

It was not in the nature of Garth to fling himself like a child against bars which he knew to be unbreakable. But men have all the more of that which they contain firmly, whether manhood or sorrow or just the ache of the thought that what we did is done and that no second chance ever comes—some other kind of chance, perhaps, but not the old one again. He stood still and numb, as horses do when in pain.

V

Abrupt and enormous, the first clang of midnight came from Gistleham Church while he thus stood, enduring minute by minute. The clang had the smashing brute harshness that these sounds acquire when heard from very near, with the hush of night to make them seem nearer. Garth counted with a nod each beat of this passing bell that must toll so much of life and beauty out of the world.

The war had begun—now or an hour ago. As the twelfth hammer stroke's last vibrations were thinning away his eyes were caught by a bright light in the garden. He walked to the window, which had lain open till now, the summer night streaming in with its infinitesimal murmur.

He looked out. Two shafts of light thrown from somewhere in the house, above his head, had turned two strips of the lawn to brilliant green; and from the base of each of these luminous panels there rose, as a painted bust does from the bottom of its frame, a head and shoulders silhouetted in black. Both were motionless. Why, of course. The lights came from Molly's and Auberon's rooms. The next moment he saw that his own lamp was casting a third panel of brilliancy out on the lawn, with a third figure painted in black on its vivid surface. All the three shadows were stoically still: each perhaps trying to staunch whatever secret bleeding there was in its own heart with the enwrapping beauty of the August midnight and the beloved river and fields. All the peace that there was in the world seemed to envelop these still; they felt nothing yet; their sleep was as quiet as that of a child who has only just swallowed some venomous germ. The far-off tumble of the lasher murmured its dreamiest drone; from poplar to poplar the owls exchanged placid signals; from inland, on the Great West Road, there came softened by distance the leisurely rumble and grind of a market-gardener's horsed wagon early on its way to Covent Garden.

One of the shadows moved a little and Garth heard a voice calling, "Molly! You there?"

The other shadow started; there was a moment's pause and then the reply, "Hullo, Bron," in a voice carefully cheerful.

"Everything in the garden is lovely," said Auberon. It was a catch phrase of the day, but the tone was one of

contentment and peace. A kind of sob, like an uncontrollable shudder, shook his father. He saw the child that had gloated over the daffodils as they swung in the wind at twilight: "Lamps o' blooty, lamps o' blooty!" No one had helped the little creature to grow into all that he might have become, with those eyes that made everything new. Yet he was unspoilt; he could still delight in the feel of life as he walked to the slaughter-house.

"Goo'-night. Fun to-morrow," said Bron, and one of the shafts of light gave a quick wink and vanished. The bust that was framed in the second sank slowly down the next minute, till the shadow thrown on the lawn was only that of a head fallen on one side, resting on some vague mass that threw a low shadow.

Compassion can interpret quickly. "She's kneeling," thought Garth; "her arms are crossed on the sill; her cheek is down on one arm and the low mass is her hair and her shoulders. Oh! by God, it's all shaken and quivering. I can't stand this: I must go to her."

He started towards the door, and then checked. What help could he give? He might talk, but her lover and her brother would be dying still. So he stayed in his own cell, and left her to hers, in their monastery of pain, each to listen with the prescient ears of the tender-hearted and the wise to the cracking of the arches that supported their ordered world.

BOOK SIX

CHAPTER XVII

I

"AS any man 'ere," said Company Sergeant-Major Browning, late of the Grenadier Guards, "'ad any service in th' Army, Navy or any auxillary force?" Out of chaos, or something so nearly resembling it as a crowd of recruits still in civilian clothes, the Sergeant-Major had just carved Number One Section of A Company of a new-born battalion of the King's Own Middlesex Fusiliers, known in a friendly way as the Comfies. He was now addressing the sixteen men who in the last twenty minutes had become a new organism.

Fifteen of them could only hold their tongues. Three of these were Victor, Fulford and Auberon. A fourth was Bert, long a doughty Boy Scout, but no Territorial. The remaining twelve were a teacher of boxing, a market porter from Smithfield, a carroty-haired Irish drover, a hunting parson, a dour Glasgow shipwright, a Dorsetshire farm hand, a bagman of florid exterior, a big-game hunter, an elementary school teacher, a minor professional tenor, a nervous and white London clerk and a taxi-cab tout from Leicester Square. The one man who piped up, in reply, was the tout, Alfred Cart: "Yessir. Served three year. King's Ryal Rifle Corps."

Even after a fortnight of army rations, Cart's figure was strikingly rectangular, from the effects of previous famine. The Sergeant-Major eyed with disrelish this realistic statue of Want. "Christ!" he said, "an' it a good regiment!" His desire to disbelieve Cart was unmistakable.

Cart asseverated: "S'elp me, Sawjint-Myjor! Got me pipers."

"Fall out, Private Cart," the Sergeant-Major commanded, "an' carry on drilling the section"

Cart leapt to the front and authenticated his claim by putting the section through its rudiments, in tones of thunder.

Browning watched. "An' when did *you* leave the army?" he asked, with disdain, as soon as Cart stood the section at ease.

"Four year come Christmas, Sir," said Cart.

"An' so I thought," said Browning regally. "Callin' a section a squad! Every 'arf minute! 'Squad'! Proper ante-di-luvian! Any one else like to try 'is 'and for a stripe?" The Sergeant-Major cast a look that was almost imploring at those of the men whose clothes were the best. "What!" he said. "No 'ealthy ambition! Carry on, then, Private Cart." He stalked away to create Number Two Section.

Number One Section were taken aback: there was no denying it. Band of brothers and all that, of course, but still—to be ruled over by Cart, with his thin lips and lowering brows and measly white face, the colour of grass that has had a board lying on it for weeks; he looked like an Apache as the picture papers fancy Apaches. Clearly he was the man who, of all the sixteen, had fared worst in the world and dropped lowest; middle-class instinct would sooner have trusted a gold watch to any one of the other fifteen.

Perhaps the section grew rather absent-minded, through thinking this over. Certainly Cart's hold on it presently slackened. The drill was growing downright bad when Lloyd, the Regimental Sergeant-Major, hove in sight. Every one saw him while still far off, bearing down on the corner where Number One Section was slouching through its sluggish performance. Cart gave the section a look of appeal so agonised that Auberon's bowels of pity moved him to grunt back over his shoulder to the rear rank, "Let's pull him through." Fulford, rear-rank man of the same file, took it up like a shot. "That's right"—he stage-

whispered; "give him a chance," and from that moment life and swing, precision and elasticity seemed to descend, like a Holy Ghost, upon the fifteen 'prentice soldiers. They were above themselves; they melted from formation into formation, like a *corps de ballet*; and Cart, too, rose to the crisis: lance-corporal's pay, a whole fourpence extra per day, was in full view; he barked round his small flock like the most proudly efficient of sheep-dogs: he never once said "Squad!"

Lloyd watched, with a look of grave contentment that would always settle on his face at the sight of a bit of work decently done. "Gud! Very gud—for a Monday morning," he rapped out, before turning away. The men saw him talking, afar, to Browning; once he jerked his head towards themselves. Could he be saying that they might make soldiers yet?

II

The infant battalion slept on the floor of a vast and echoing London exhibition hall. Cart lay between Auberon and Victor. Auberon had for several days been on the Christian-name plane of friendship with Cart; and, as soon as the bugle had blown "Lights Out" on the evening of this great day of hope for the famished procurer of taxis, he freely offered his two neighbours the handsomest reassurances. "You can gow on callin' me Alf," he said to Auberon, "after I put me stripe up. You 'aven't ever got to stan' me no more drinks an' you 'aven't ever got to call me Cart, when once I got me rank. But you can call me Corp or you can call me Alf. On'y down't call me Cart. Thet's discipline, thet is."

Then he turned round to Victor. "Down't tike it 'ard, do yer, Beak?—me 'avin' charge o' the section?" Nearly every one had a nickname already; Victor's was The Beak, in honour of his Olympian or magisterial distinction of speech and bearing.

"Good Lord, no!" Victor answered.

"Ya see," Cart earnestly explained, "the wye of it is this. In drillin' men, yer got to speak invari'bly as if yer 'ad a quarrel with 'em. Thet's discipline, thet is. All-a-same I know it got to come a bit thick 'avin' somebody like me a-tellin' orf the like o' you."

"Oh, I suppose we're all Socialists now." Victor quoted, rather listlessly, a current saying of the clubs.

"You a Sowshilist!" Cart marvelled and reasoned silently for a minute, and then asked, "Yn't yer got no means?"

"Oh, a pittance," said Victor.

"Wot's Sowshilism, then? Yn't it you can't 'ardly get 'old of a bit but wot it's took off yer? Wot use is thet to you?" Again the mind of the section-commander-elect travailed silently for a while. Lance-Corporal's pay —one and fourpence a day, one and fourpence a day, if only prospective. He testified fervently: "I yn't a Sowshilist!"

"Nor I," said Victor. But he was too weary just now to try to show an illiterate rough what irony was.

Cart took Auberon aside next day. "That chum o' yourn yn't unwell, I'spowse?" he asked. Cart's scowling white mask looked anxious.

"No. Why?" said Auberon.

"Fust 'e says 'e's a Sowshilist. Then 'e says 'e yn't. Down't seem to know wot 'e is, do 'e?"

"That's all right," said Auberon, relieved. "He always talks like that."

"Chronic, ah? I tell ya strite, if I 'ad any brass an' felt like turnin' Sowshilist, I'd get me 'at an' gow an' see me doctor."

Auberon explained—it was The Beak's little game—kind of pulling your leg without laughing; you didn't have

to make out what it meant; nobody could; but The Beak was all right, every time.

Cart's fears for Victor's reason were lulled to rest for the time. Still, he was clearly going to keep an eye on the case: a good section-commander must father his men.

A miracle, you observe, was happening: sixteen diverse men were cementing themselves into a family. Of all classes, of all ages from eighteen to fifty, nearly all of them were finding one another incredibly good to live with. Each of them was, to most of the others, a curious find; everybody was chaffed and nothing was taken amiss. They had their heroes, too, as if they were boys again, and among these was Browning, the man who was what they all wished to be —the made soldier; he had the key; he carried the lamp; with his clanging gong of a voice and storming way of getting things done as they should be, he seemed to lift and haul them along towards soldierly smartness.

Auberon felt he had never known there was so good a life to be lived on earth. Always to have just some one plain and not hard thing to do; to be free to give yourself up, without a sense of shirking, to whole days of rude health, to let yourself go, with a will, in the swing of marching, the patterned dances of drill, the thrilling symbolism of guards, with the changeful chain of blithe or grave calls blown on bugles to lead you through the busy, easy day It felt as if you were friends with whatever it was that made the world go round; you were in with the sun from rise to set, the stars you watched at night, as a sentry, were comrades moving on their appointed posts, like yourself. It was as though they had all been given a second chance, or new start in life, and at times it all felt so good that it almost seemed as if it must be wicked.

III

Sergeant-Major Browning must have suffered agonies of self-restraint during those first months of recruit drill in London. In that resonant exhibition-hall things were too public. You couldn't put the fear of God into these Kitchener rabbits without being heard all over London—and checked, perhaps, by some little ass of a New Army officer. But now the battalion was to go into camp. A man would be able to do himself justice.

So the first notes of Réveillé were hardly out of the bugle, the morning after the Comfies went into camp, when Browning burst into the hut where Number One Section lay. He hated getting up so early that he could be there, spick and span, at that moment. He did not mean to have his effort go to waste by letting the men leap up from their plank beds before he had time to make them do it under fire from his manly tongue. Thus he fairly beat the bugler.

The smash, when he did let fly at the awakening men, was like the burst of a tank of raw sewage. Auberon had known the table-talk of rotten sets at Oxford and the filth exchanged as conversation by scrubby "bloods" at school. But he recognised, as he scrambled to his feet, that, in this vein of eloquence, no seat of learning had anything to teach Browning.

Victor had less than Auberon had of the dog's trick of awaking instantaneously out of the deepest sleep, all ready for action. So he was still recumbent, and rubbing bewildered eyes, when Browning halted opposite Victor's outstretched feet. With the smashing nearness of the clap that puts a climax to a thunderstorm, a grenade of particularly intimate invective detonated over Victor's ears; it banged against their drums—kicked and hammered on the doors. "Out of it! Bloody 'og! Wallowin' there in yer

slime! Out of it, ya stinkin' loafer! Sulk, you bloody ——, would yer? I'll mark yer. I'll 'ave no —— bloody swabs shirkin' in this crowd. Tryin' it on with your bloody —— lie-a-bed tricks! Out of it, ya mangy snot!"

Victor shambled up anyhow, on to his feet. He looked as if the jet of muck that was pumped full in his face, with an energy like a fire-engine's, numbed as well as befouled him. Branding him with a venomous note-taking look and a final "I'll mark yer," the foul cyclone worked its way on to the hut's farther door. Victor, of course, had done Browning a sort of wrong—had engaged his attention till every other man in the hut was so manifestly risen and struggling into his trousers that nothing was now left for the martyr to early rising to do but to stalk out of the hut, only turning to fulminate from the door, "Worst —— hut in all this bloody country! Worst mob of ——! Get on p'rade! I'll see you bloody well sweat for it!"

This undertaking the Sergeant-Major was able faithfully to fulfil; for no officer of the Company was out of bed that morning for the six-thirty parade.

First the Sergeant-Major gave A Company an hour of "physical drill" at its hardest and fastest. It was disgusting: nobody showed signs of wear. Most of the weaker men had been secretly getting themselves into condition—dropping their whisky and their smokes and any little favourite sins against good training, for fear they should never get to the front. This was hard on Browning. His own strength was a glory and a wonder: still, he had been in the public-house business for two years, since leaving the Guards. But he knew the men's stomachs were empty all right, whereas he had levied a bowl of tea and some biscuits from the early-rising corporal-cook before starting. So he led the men a mile at the double, not straight ahead, but in small twisty

coils and giddying loops, circling in and out on the jewelled grass. One of the younger boys fainted at last.

Browning exulted. "Lug 'im out, you—and you," he sang out to two men; and then, to the rest, "Get on with it, ya bloody grease-merchants!"

The convolutions went on rather faster. Passing the two men who had fallen out by order and were now trying to revive the limp object that they had dragged out of action, Browning roared to them, "God a'mighty! D'ya think yer paid to be 'ospital nurses? Get back to yer places an' listen next time what th' Army Act says about 'angin' back to atten' to the wounded."

A man in Number One Section, Smythe, the little pallid, set-faced City clerk, was the next one to faint. "'Aul 'im out!" Browning yelled triumphantly. "This'll sweat the booze out o' yer guts." He was puffing a little himself. But he did not shirk. This was worth the fag.

Two more men were stretched among the wet docks and nettles before the bugle from the misty camp among the trees blew breakfast. As Browning stalked off the parade-ground he threw back an order over his shoulder: "Get the bloody casualties shifted, Sergeant Burrows. What? Where to? Hell. Any old place."

Some of the men's faces were greenish or yellowish. Victor's and Fulford's were two of them. Auberon's breath was scarcely quickened; his face wore its robust red-brown; his full eyes were almost bluish with clearness in the whites, round their lustrous brown pupils. It was all fun to him. But he had trained crews and teams in his time and he knew that this showy business of sweating men on empty stomachs was just silly. Besides it hurt him to see Victor look so cheap. As the men tailed off to the huts he edged up to Victor. "Bit of a grind, that," said Auberon, almost feigning, in a friendly way, the fatigue he did not feel.

"Oh, it was all right," Victor said lifelessly.

In the hut, the breakfast of Number One Section began in silence. When Gaydon, the florid-faced bagman, piped up at last, "If the Colonel were told, that swine would be for it," no one supported him.

"Hwat's the use o' squealin'?" said Terence McGurk, the huge and red-headed. "The Rig'lars do more, I'll engage, every mornin' comes out o' the sky."

"Thet's right, Ginger," little Smythe said quietly. He had just crawled back to the hut.

Food and their own stubborn will to make the best of things were restoring the men's spirits: Cart, the military veteran and student of mankind, provided a safety-valve for any residual ill-feeling in the form of soldierly abuse of all who were not infantry. Cavalry and Guards had had a lot too much to do with running this old show in France *and* here. "Gaw'ds!" he said. "They don't know 'arf o' nothing, on'y 'ow to mike a noise. See 'em salute! You'd 'ear 'em 'arf a mile off. Bangin' their 'eels together! Beatin' the dust out o' their caps and their slacks like bloody cawpets! Ah!—an' kevalry! Flingin' their 'eads right an' lef' when they number orf. God 'elp the lads in Frawnce, they're in bad 'ands. All-a-same, they'll pull it orf. They got to, them an' us."

This last was the feeling that ruled everything. The job had got to be done; you couldn't bother about the characters of people with whom you were working to put out a fire.

IV

At the end of another two months Auberon was to gain dazzling and utterly unexpected promotion. The Company were digging a trench in the Wiltshire chalk, and Auberon's happy body was putting up a kind of physical hymn of jubilation by making the white rubble fly out on to the turf

in a briskly rhythmical sequence of jets as his spade swung back and forth lustily in the shallow bed of the trench.

"Stout fellow, that," said Captain Black, the Company commander, as he passed with Browning.

"*Might* make a soldier, Sir, in time," the Sergeant-Major allowed, without enthusiasm.

"Any good at his drill?" The Captain looked at Browning sharply as he spoke. Black was not really the man to wait for his Sergeant-Major to tell him what a private was worth.

Browning was cautious. "'E's no genius, Sir. 'E gives 'is mind to 'is work."

"Could he command a section?"

"I'd 'ardly say that, Sir. 'E might make a second to Corp'ral Cart in Number One Section."

"Put him up for a stripe," said the Captain.

Browning sent for Auberon that night. "Garth," he said, "I've kep' an eye on you, this long time back. I fancy I know a good man soon's I see 'im. Any'ow I've made up me mind to recommen' you to Captain Black for a stripe. An' I 'ope very sincerely you'll do a bit o' credit to me judgement."

Auberon said he would try, and in three days his name was in orders and Browning had "borrowed" a fiver, the whole of Auberon's available cash, with a few brotherly words about all N.C.O.'s stickin' together.

To Auberon's further astonishment the whole hut took his preferment like so many angels. Cart, now a full Corporal, was unmistakably pleased at having Auberon for a vice-gerent. During the working day Cart concealed this emotion under a manner austerely authoritative. "I want a bit more of a move got on, Corporal Gawth, with them men layin' aht their kits," he would say dryly and exactingly. The first time that Auberon essayed to drill the section,

Cart was outwardly censorious. "It yn't wot's required," he said. "We want a loud, firm vyce, an' a bit 'aughty, 's if you was tellin' orf the men for sutthink they done." Only after the toils of the day, when Cart and Auberon would have an hour's quiet talk over their evening pint of ale in a corner of the Corporals' Mess—one of them always standing the first half-pint, and the other the second—would Cart unbend. There he avowed the extreme terror with which he had found himself in command over dragons of social prestige like The Beak, the Corner 'Ouse (as Devine, the slayer of lions, was called), Caruso the Song (Capel) and the Bishop (the hunting parson).

"There's on'y two things," Cart confessed, "as kep' me up. Fair rygin', thet's wot I been, to get on a bit in the Army so's me young lidy and me can get married. Thet was one thing. Thet's ambition, thet is. Four year I been courtin'. Anythink doin', yerself, that wye?"

Cart was seriously concerned lest Auberon should never know the transports of virtuous love. "Runnin' after every bit o' fluff yer see, sime's a dog, thet's on'y lus', thet is. Thet's nothink." Cart wanted Auberon to have his share of all the real good things. For it seemed that Cart's second prop and stay, at the crisis of his fate, had been Auberon's notion of prompting the section to pull him through, under Lloyd's critical eyes, on the day of Cart's first ordeal as its commander. "Pulled me through when I was beat an' 'opeless. Thet's wot *you* done. Thet's lyelty, thet is. If we was all like you, we'd 'ave a proper country."

Absurd! As if it had not been as easy to say what Auberon had said as to say anything else. But Cart, it appeared, was full of secret admirations—for Fulford's quiet gumption at all crises, for Bert's Boy Scout dexterity in signalling, for the unconscious, nerveless hardihood of the giant McGurk and the nervous, set, quivering pluck of the

little white Smythe. "Mawv'lous set o' men! Mawv'-lous!" Cart and Auberon would now talk over all their little needs, oddities and ailments with the intimacy of a father and mother discussing little Jimmy's rows at school and wondering why little Joe is so much off his oats.

Victor seemed to be on the commander's mind. "Seems dized, like, down't 'e?" said Cart, as he and Auberon sat on two up-ended barrels, their voices hidden under the evening din of the Corporals' Mess. "Tell yer wot——"

"Yes?" said Auberon eagerly.

"'Member 'ow the Sawjint-Myjor put it acrorst 'im? Long agow, at Revelly?"

"Yes."

"Went orf the deep end at 'im, proper. Nowtice 'ow the ol' Beak took it?"

"It knocked him off his perch, all right," Auberon said ruefully.

"Ah. Seems like as if it 'ad cricked sutthing in 'is works —'s if 'e cawn't git owver it. See 'im yesteday, on that rowt mawch? Mawchin' fit to mike yer cry. Not a 'yporth o' swing to it!"

"That's right," Auberon gravely agreed.

"No 'elpin' 'im, neither. 'Ere,' I says, five mile from 'ome, 'gimme a look at thet rifle o' yourn.' 'No!' 'e says. Jus' 'No!' Wouldn't 'ave me kerry it, no price. Thet's pride, thet is. Mikes him a 'ard 'orse to trine."

V

On a cloudless June evening Auberon made an opportunity to get Victor out of camp for a walk after tea, when the day's parades were done and all men were free. At first Victor said he was tired—thought he would lie on his cot and read something; then he jumped up, as if reading were

dross, and said restlessly. "No. Let us get out of this. 'Which way?' Oh, anywhere."

So Auberon chose their direction. Through a mile of warm heather and bracken, and then between gardens vivacious with pinks and roses he made for the nearest country town. It was the seat of many ripened amenities —grave, mellow Georgian houses with Tennysonian pleasaunces round them and, at the quarter hours, a low cooing of bells.

They tried to dine at a big genial inn of red brick with a wisteria clambering about it and the clean glass and silver shining on many empty tables in its open-windowed "coffee room." But this was an "Officers' house"; so the pretty girl in charge looked with embarrassed kindly eyes at their uniforms and had to say it was full. The little rebuff seemed to fret Victor. "Oh, let's clear out," he said, before she could finish. They fell back on a clean public-house where "sausage and mashed" never failed. There was no discomfort about it—much more comfort, indeed, than in eating among outraged Staff colonels and majors. Why did Victor not sprinkle the incident with the glittering spray of his old wit? Auberon desired the lawful pleasure of standing, blinking and wondering, in the midst of that dazzling mist, as in a shower-bath. But none of it came; the fountain was not playing as of old.

Certain things seemed to have got upon Victor's nerves; as your tongue seeks persistently the sharp point of a broken tooth, to hurt itself with, so did Victor come back again and again to trivial things that he had overheard in the Officers' Mess or the Sergeants' Mess, as a fatigue man, washing the grease off dirty plates with tepid water. Did Auberon know that the virtuous Fulford had just made friends with Mammon?—that Browning was putting Fulford up for Sergeant of their platoon? Even worse, it seemed, for the

peace of Victor's mind than Browning's traffic in stripes was the Officers' Mess, with its witless, ill-conditioned "rags" and its poor old dug-out Colonel, a second-rate younger son of a decayed family, a man dignified and clean, but stupid and cold and sadly bewildered by his task of teaching manners to whipper-snappers and hobbledehoys.

Auberon couldn't quite see that it mattered so much: Black, at any rate, was a regular top-hole man, and little Mellett, who commanded the platoon, was a real good un as well. Besides, every team had its tail. He did not say this to Victor. Victor was not a man to talk platitudes to. But Auberon had come to think, more and more, that quite a lot of old platitudes were most shiningly and engagingly true.

After their meal they walked up the comely street of modest houses of state to which the Wiltshire squires of two hundred years ago had come, when the hunting was over, to give their wives and daughters a good time in their turn. From somewhere or other a searchlight was throwing its shafts of light about the mystic deeps of the dusk; each groped along its beat till it met some other luminous sentry moving on its post across the under side of the sky. From heavily curtained windows little trickles and jets of brilliant light spurted and leaked, as if the tight walls of the houses were squeezing this overflow out of packed bales of festal radiance within. The tender twilight and the hum of the country town settling down to its rest went to Auberon's head; a snatch of a song came from an open window; all the murmurous stir of friendly English existence was abroad.

Half the battalion seemed to be out walking, singly or in couples, under the whispering almonds and acacias of a sort of boulevard. "Well, I suppose you must have all sorts in a crowd," the platitudinarian Auberon murmured in mild insurrection against the ironic sourness of Victor's remarks on almost every acquaintance they passed.

"Oh?" Victor's voice was shrill with a falsetto donnish petulance. "Were there all sorts in the crowd at Thermopylæ? Or at Agincourt?"

"There was good old Pistol, you know." Auberon, to his amazement, found himself citing a thing out of a book—a little blue copy of *Henry V.* that Molly had given him. He had found it strangely delicious to read, in spite of the author's deplorable reputation among most of Auberon's friends.

"Pistol—Bardolph—Nym"; Victor counted them out, like one musing drearily. "We've got 'em all. But where's Fluellen?"

"Well—there!" said Auberon doggedly. He pointed straight ahead, where Sergeant-Major Lloyd was walking alone. A Regimental Sergeant-Major is often alone. In his battalion he is the loneliest man. No other non-commissioned comes near him in rank. Every officer is far above him. Like some of the damned, in legend, he dwells in a middle void, hung up between heaven and earth.

Victor had never taken much notice of Lloyd. "Old Regular?" he asked.

"Twenty-three years' service," said Auberon reverently.

"Oh, then——" Victor made a contemptuous gesture. At that moment the sharp profile of Lloyd's face showed clear under a lamp as he turned left to enter a public-house, where he would sometimes drink, of an evening, his one glass of beer.

"Good!" said Victor. "I'll show you." His voice had a forced calmness now.

Victor was making straight for the door by which Lloyd had gone in. It was the door of the least public of the house's many bars. "In we go!" Victor said, with a strained jauntiness that was not in his character. It was ghastly. But Auberon could not take flight. As if some

horrible current had set in and involved them both, he followed Victor through the swing door.

In the tiny slit of a bar there were two high stools and two ample spittoons, close up under a high red mahogany counter. The Sergeant-Major had taken one of the stools, but his beer had not come yet.

"Evening, Major," Victor began. He was doing the bluff, jovial touch—overdoing it, in a way that made Auberon shudder. "Major!"—no doubt Victor had heard one of the older sergeants address Lloyd like that.

The Sergeant-Major eyed their regimental badges. "Men of the seventh battalion?" he asked.

"That's it, Sir," Auberon said, very respectfully.

But Victor was beyond recall. "Let me persuade you," Auberon heard him say in that raffish, unnatural voice. "A glass of champagne, Major, after the toils of the day."

Lloyd made no answer. He took two pennies out of his right trouser-pocket and laid them down beside the glass of beer that the barman had now brought him. Then he walked straight out of the place. In the desolation that he left behind him the pennies and the untasted beer could almost be heard crying, like angels, trumpet-tongued, against the gracelessness that had left them thus frustrated. Auberon felt as if he had been seeing, all his life, the pattern made on the floor by three old gobs of spittle and two small spills of beer that had run about, licking up sawdust.

"I'm sorry, Bron," Victor was saying. "I've lost hold. I deserve all he gave me. He couldn't have been better."

VI

They walked back to camp, draggle-tailed, with Victor lapsing into self-pity. He said his mind was losing its edge; it had gone dull, or something; the chain was slipping on the cogs, the wheel wouldn't bite on the rail; oh, he couldn't

describe it. Soldiering, he said, had always been splendid to read of—"glorious war," a brotherhood in arms—there *must* have been something in it, at some time or other. But now——! Victor's despairing gesture seemed to dismiss their whole life and surroundings as hopelessly ignoble.

Auberon had nothing to say. He could only take Victor's upper arm in one of his own large hands and pinch it with an affectionate roughness. Auberon had dealt so little with books that he had no idea that those assistant-teachers of the art of living could be perverted into screens for a soft mind to hold between all the harsh winds of life and itself, till it becomes so tender that a blast of the real thing may quell it utterly—or at any rate till reality seems only like some poor bungled copy or lame illustration of the vision entertained by the luxurious mind.

Of course Auberon and all the other 'prentice soldiers had, in some measure, been turned out of Paradise since they had enlisted. But Auberon was not an easy Adam to afflict. Even the fiery sword at the gate was a curious novelty to him; the serpent himself had points; he was a grand beast of his kind. The battalion was botched by this time; nothing could now make it the splendid thing that it might have been if its training had been equal to its raw material. But nothing could annul, for Auberon, the enchantments of this long summer among stout comrades in the sun, from daybreak to nightfall; the days of route-marching across weald and down, with the weather dimming the wayside roses with dust and brightening them again with rain; the snugness of deep straw in barns and the deep placidity of evening hours in bivouacs under the brightening stars, with little peals of laughter and chaff tinkling through the dark and the glow of puffed pipes rising and falling; the lazy week of day-long picnic, lying out loose on the warm short chalk-land turf, for the battalion musketry course; and

night operations, with Auberon somewhere alone in the exciting, confidential darkness, chuckling and grinning while he skulked stealthily along a ditch or wriggled on his belly across fields of stubble, quivering with the ungovernable ecstasy of kittens when primal impulses of furtive swiftness revive in their baby souls and they stalk visionary prey, with a mysterious passion of joy, across the oil-clothed floor; most of all, perhaps, the homeward evening swing of the brown, sweat-stained and sun-filled troops when the dew was laying the white dust—the jump in the heart when the familiar tune broke out from the band, on ahead, and the tired column braced itself to exchange the proud salute with the little mustered guard that stood, with all England in its keeping, under the elm by the camp gate; and then the Dismiss and the instant lapse of all limbs into luxurious unconcern as the men stumped slowly away to their several huts, now dear to their homing minds as the stable is to the horse. If only Victor could get all the joy of it too!

VII

In the hut they found Cart alone. On these midsummer nights almost every one stayed out till the last lawful moment, but Cart had a trick, on the finest evenings, of keeping the house by himself. Auberon pretty well knew what Cart did at these times. As soon as the rest were gone off to their fun, and his rank need not hinder him, Cart would fuss round the inside of the hut, smartening up to the nines whatever detail the hut orderlies of the day might have left short of perfection. He sat at the long table now, smoking his pipe in his shirt-sleeves and reading with a somewhat distracted air the murders in the *Evening Star*, with windows opened to the utmost all about him. Like most of the very poor he hated fresh air and prized heat, in almost any form, as a thing that cost money. Still, the modern

school of draught-lovers was strong in the hut, and Cart wanted them all to like coming home of an evening.

"What's this I hear," said Auberon, when Victor had left the hut again for a while, "—about Fulford?"

"Thet's right," the hut commander said ruefully. "We're brikin' up. All the Upper 'Ouse is gowin', bar you an' The Beak."

Auberon knew it. As trench life drew nearer, Devine, the great hunter of lions, had thought twice and then taken a commission in the Army Ordnance Corps. Gaydon, the moneyed bagman, had turned Base Cashier and was living at ease on the fair shores of France. "Wot ow, Bishop, leavin' us?" Cart had sorrowfully had to say to the hunting parson three days ago, when that divine had said good-bye, to become an Army Chaplain in Devonshire.

Auberon thought he saw how it hurt Cart. Men were fleeing—so Cart saw it—from his command. He must have failed somewhere, and yet he couldn't see where. "I can't do no better," he said to Auberon now, with a certain return, in his face, of the defeated look with which he had first emerged from the lower depths, to enlist. "I've kep' the grease out o' me guts. I ain't swore at the men—not to call swearin'. I've kep' the 'ut respectable."

He had indeed. On points of parlour manners Cart had been a veritable dragon. When "Turmits," the farm hand from Dorset, had given a mighty belch at dinner, Cart had not cast upon the misdemeanant, at the moment, so much as an identifying glance. But during the next pause in the talk he had raised his voice solemnly. "Sutthink 'appened," he said, "five minutes agow, which I 'ope and arsk it may never 'appen again in this 'ut."

But Cart seemed to see his past exertions now as so many failures. And yet, a minute after, he spoke as if ashamed of such a murmur against fate. "Down't you tike no

'eed," he said, after a pause, "o' what I said jus' now, fust gow orf. Come strite orf me chest, thet's wot it done. Thet's wawnt o' self-restrynt, thet is. Down't you 'eed it." Cart paused again and then said fervently: "Gord! if we could on'y all stick on together, sime's we are, I wouldn' call the King me uncle."

Auberon saw better now. Cart's pangs were not those of personal disappointment alone, but also those of the aching affection that sets sold cattle breaking loose to rush back to the harshest of lost friends and the least luxurious of homes. Cart was being bereaved.

Victor's blank face reappeared at the door "'E'll be 'oppin' it next," Cart muttered gloomily.

"I don't think, Alf," Auberon answered, after gravely weighing the chances.

CHAPTER XVIII

I

A LOW-BROWED dawn was looking sulky when the men of Number One Section took their first look at France. For twelve hours they had been packed tightly into some sort of square cabin, deep in the bowels of a black ship with no lights, which had stolen across from Southampton to Havre in the night.

The weather had been dirty and, when the contents of all stomachs had been well churned by the sea, the cabin had become dirty too. "'Orrors o' war! 'Orrors of war!" Corporal Cart had said cheerfully, as he ministered to his afflicted command. "The ol' Boche'll be nothink to this." Like all wise physicians, Cart had sought chiefly to second the operations of nature: "'Eave oh, Turmits," he would say; "strite before yer!" "Gow it, Beak," he would say; "let 'em 'ave it. Thet's the stuff to give 'em." But a last the ship had bumped against the quay at Havre, flinched away, and come to rest, with quiet harbour ripples flapping against her sides.

Stiff, cheap and befouled, the men came out of the dark stinking heat of the ship into a raw north wind and shambled down a steep gangway to a flagged quay veined with many sunk lines of railway. There they fell in and were "stood easy" for more than an hour.

Nobody looked at them. Frenchmen had long since ceased to be stirred by the landing of more British troops. A gang of German prisoners were loading trucks with coal from a ship; they worked with lifeless diligence, their faces empty of all expression, like men whose traffic with happiness had ended many years ago. Almost as dreary to look at as these blank-faced automata were another gang of men who were slackly shifting timber. These wore dirty khaki, and

almost every regimental badge in the army seemed to be worn by one or more of them. A little A.S.C. corporal clerk who slouched across the quay from a hut to an office in a shed threw his fellow-corporal, Cart, a cheery Cockney hail of "Wot ow, soldier!" and grinned meaningly towards the khaki dock-labourers. "Some o' the larky boys, Corp," he informed the newcomer to this theatre of war.

"Wot they done?" Cart asked him. "Liked a glass o' beer?"

The other Cockney leered. "Liked a bit o' fluff. Them's V.D.'s, Corp. Nummer Ex 'Orspital. Orficers among 'em. Two 'oly chaplains, too. 'Ave to grub wi' the men, they do. No orficers' ablution, neither. Ah, they put 'em through it, proper."

A hospital train clanked slowly over many intersecting points on to the quay and drew up by a green-and-white hospital ship. Loos had just been fought, and the train was full of some of the last rags and shreds that our High Command had made of the magnificent cloth given to it to cut victory out of. In a few minutes more this human litter was being carried on board the hospital ship, on stretchers, by men with grizzled heads and stiffish joints, turned out of the trenches for rheumatism, bronchitis or just the slowness of years.

To Auberon even these dismal wisps of war refuse supplied a kind of stimulation. The foul gastric stench that still stuck in his nostrils, the leaden chill of France's unwelcoming face in the glum dawn, engendered in Auberon a curious secret glee. It felt as if some winter night were closing in with an unexpected harshness round a hut with a great fire roaring inside. No doubt he was just drawing up closer to the heartening internal blaze that the adventurous spirit carries about with it. He found he had to grin,

privately, with an unaccountable exultation, just because everything was, superficially, so beastly.

But Victor? Was that fire burning in Victor all right? For the twentieth time that morning Auberon glanced at him. Victor was standing in a common attitude of tired soldiers—using his rifle as a prop or flying-buttress, its butt on the ground behind him, its muzzle against his back, shoring him up. He was looking incuriously at the grimy party of incontinents whose joy of life had brought them here to slave at shifting sodden timber. Auberon's eye met Sergeant Fulford's and found that Fulford's was on Victor too. Fulford looked anxious.

At last there was a stir. From somewhere up at the landward end of the quay Captain Black came back almost bounding towards the Company. Little Mellett was striding alongside the Captain, his cane grasped by the ferrule and swishing briskly behind him, like some tiny lion's lashing tail. Every one knew what that meant.

In the sky a half-hearted attempt at a lurid sunrise of wild or impassioned colour had now been finally abandoned. All colour was gone; the grey air had thickened; the first flakes of that winter's snow began to blow about dryly, with the dust and bits of straw, over the paved quay. In ten minutes more the snow was falling densely and the men marched off into a sort of white darkness to investigate the strange events of war.

II

On their way from the sea to the line of battle, during the next two weeks, the Comfies made some fine mixed additions to their experience. Their first night they slept in a "rest" camp of brown tents on a flat of brown mud; the mud froze at night and ceased to squelch up between the floor-boards and dirty the men. That was good, but they had to shave at high speed in the morning, lest the

lather should freeze on their chins as they stood in the dark at the open-air ablution troughs in the windy north end of the camp. They entrained, in that morning's twilight, in goods trucks completely closed in and dark—" Proper ol' sleepin' cars—wot? " Booker said as he swung himself up from ground level.

McGurk agreed. " I'd liefer live in this thravellin'-thrunk than beyant in the vissel. Be cripes, the time she felt the say, she was the spit of a strong young horse under your buttocks."

Victor was much in request, all the time, as a pundit in the tongue, habits and geography of France. And Cart, like a wily psychologist, encouraged this pumping of Victor; he told Auberon it was good for all parties: " 'Elps the men to get a bit o' good out o' wot they 'as to see—an' stops the Beak gowin' orf dead-like. See?—yer gotta mike men—every man yer 'ave—feel as 'e's some good at sutthink, wotever it is. Thet's self-respec', thet is. Thet's 'ow a man is kep' up some day, when things is up agen 'im." So Cart made a point of asking " Wot's the Frenchy stuff mean, Beak? " pointing to the legend " Hommes 40. Chevaux 8 " that was painted up, apparently from birth, on every truck like their own.

The men had listened carefully while Victor explained. When they found that thirty of them were to go in each truck, Bowell, the boxing man, the " White Hope," chuckled. " Frenchies know a bit! " he said. " Paint oop ' Forty pla-aces ' outside troock, soa's when nobbut thirty folk is shoved inside they'll say ' By goom! We got a cushy doss. No more nor thirty men for forty pla-aces! ' "

" Thet's diplowmacy, thet is," said Cart.

They rumbled and jerked along for a day and a night, with countless stops and hesitations and endless clangorous strainings and loosenings of the long train's many couplings.

Now and then Cart would peer out through a crack in the truck's walls and put tonic questions to Victor—"Is th' Alps anywhere 'andy?" "Wots a plice wiv three big churches?" "'Ere's a stytion called Eat Apples. W'ere's Eat Apples, Beak? Up Wipers wye?"

"It's up every way to our front, if you start down at Havre." Victor's voice was almost pettish.

"Tha's gettin' 'oongry, Beak," said Bowell, sympathetically. "Roll on, dinner time."

Time rolled slowly, like the train. But mid-day did come at last, and Cart dished out the rations from a sack, among them dry tea which gave scandal to Ruthven, the Glasgow riveter and the dourest of scoffers at War Office intellect—all through the battalion's training he had been ejaculating at intervals, "Naething thocht oot!" "A' daft together!" "Nae seestem at a'!" Now he jeered at such rationing: "What use wad the tea-leaves be to us noo, in this kist o' matchwood?"

"God help ye, Jock," McGurk rebuked him. "Workin' inside of a boiler the howl of your life, and never givin' your mind to what boilers are med for? Han' me your dixie."

The train, according to its custom, was at rest in a leafy siding just then, and the truck's side had been thrown open. McGurk leapt out, with Ruthven's messing-tin and his own, and ran forward.

"Christ!" Booker exclaimed, a light dawning on his brain, "'e's gone to kedge it orf o' the driver!"

"Thet's livin' on the country, thet is," Cart pronounced, commendingly.

But McGurk returned crestfallen. "It niver crossed me mind," he said, "till I was all but up on th' ingine. The hot-water merchant beyant is a Frenchy."

Men turned to Victor, the truck's God-given channel of

communication with the alien. He did not leap up. Elasticity was not in him. But decency was. He rose slowly to his feet and descended stiffly to the permanent way, the other 29 men following in seemly single file, each with his portion of parched tea-leaves ready in his dixie. Corporal Cart ranged alongside the column enforcing the principle of the queue and taking his own turn last. Two or three gallons of boiling water were successfully diverted from their propulsive labours in the engine, and deep contentment soon reigned in the truck.

Victor was in high esteem. "Wojjer sye to 'im, Beak?" Cart asked, with an air of deep interest.

"Oh, I said 'Please!'" Victor answered wearily.

Booker looked round at the others. "Thet's 'ow 'e done it!" Booker said admiringly. "Now-one shouldn't be without a Beak, not in this sevvage country."

III

From their first-class carriage windows some of the officers had looked on at the raid on the engine, the good ones with joy at seeing the men taking new means to their ends like wise soldiers when put to it. Captain Black beckoned to Fulford, whose head was sticking out of a truck, and Fulford jumped down and ran along the line to him. "Who's the fellow interpreting, Sergeant?" Black asked. "Private Nevin, isn't it?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Talks good French?"

"First-rate, Sir. Knows the country too."

Black turned his face back into the carriage. "Here's the man you're wanting to help at that billeting job," he said to the Adjutant, "a Sahib; talks French like a Froggy; rising light of the Bar; Oxford degree; a bit of a flyer, all round."

"Not me—he'd know a lot too much for me," the middle-aged Adjutant replied. An old N.C.O. of the Regular Army, he dreaded the touch of quick civilian brains. They might be inquisitive, critical, dangerous to a man's peace.

"He's perfectly quiet," Black assured him. "But dev'lish tired. A ride on ahead on each of these next marching days might just set him up for the trench job."

Black opened the door and jumped out. "Walk a bit," he said to Fulford. They walked ahead, past the engine, to where the thin snow was untrodden. The blackish sky was laden with snow; the landscape looked sombre and wild with a sort of melodramatic extravagance; houses and trees stood black and sharp-edged against the white ground. "Well, Sergeant, what's it all about?" Black began abruptly.

"Sir?" said Fulford. The good sergeant in him had to be fully assured that an officer was really doing the man-to-man touch.

"Oh, of course I've no right to ask. You're quite free to snub me. Still—what's all this game?"

"Game, Sir?"

"Is that a snub?—hey?"

"Not a bit, Sir." Fulford was disarmed.

"Look here," said Black; "we'll all be dead in a few months. Why not let me into this little play you've got on! You don't think any one could care about this Company the way I do and not see that you and young Garth think of pretty well nothing except how to pull Nevin through? As for you, you old scandal, didn't you pay through the nose to that ruffian Browning to jump you up into a sergeant, just to be able to nurse Nevin better?"

"I really fancied I could do the work, Sir," Fulford pleaded.

"You've done it," said Black. "Done it damn well. That's why your stripes didn't go with the others." A

month or two ago the Company had undergone a purge. Browning and other birds of his feather had then taken flight, like swallows that feel the autumn chill coming—but not overseas. They had enlisted, according to rumour, on special life-saving terms—to drill and not fight. "No more purchase in the Army," Black had said, and had tested on the parade-ground every new N.C.O.'s power of handling men, and then had got the worthless ones bundled back into the ranks. Fulford had come triumphantly through; he had earned his rank, if ever man did, though he had got it a little sooner by palm-oil. "Why, you know as well as I do," Black said now, "that you and Garth—and Cart among the Plebs—are three of the sort that keep England from rotting. Cart won't ever get any further, because he don't know his three R's and so he can't do a Parade State. Garth I want for a sergeant, first vacancy. *You* have got to be Sergeant-Major as soon as Kerr goes. And here are all of you out as a bodyguard to one lackadaisical private."

"Nevin's an old friend of Garth's," said Fulford.

"Is that all?"

"They were at Chellingham and Oxford together."

"That all?"

"He's engaged to Garth's sister—adopted sister—some sort of cousin."

"Same name?"

"Yes."

"Not the Miss Garth—a girl of great beauty—that everybody raved about at Cambridge a few years ago?"

"That's right."

"You know her?"

"I've met her."

Black had extraordinarily sympathetic eyes, and they met Fulford's as he risked the question, "And—that was enough?"

"It was," said Fulford. There was a short pause.

" Garth, too? " Black presently asked.

" I'm not sure. He don't talk of himself."

" No, he's a fearful thoroughbred." There was a pause again. They were coming to know each other so well that Black could say presently, " So you're both telling Satan to get him behind you, and seeing the dangerous rival safe through the wars. Well, we're all queer. Hullo! The old bus is coming to life." The engine whistled behind them. They went back to their places. " I'll do what I can," Black said before they parted with the most formal salutes.

Black at once pressed his point with the Adjutant, Burt. Burt's want of French, he said, wouldn't matter a bit if he had a fellow like Nevin to help him sling the lingo.

Burt was adamant. " It's bad enough," he said, " trying to talk French before a lot of Frenchies. I'm not having any damned Frenchified Britisher round, to make me feel a worse fool every time."

So Victor's fate was not altered.

IV

Number One Section slept soundly on the truck's floor and were only awakened by the loud voices of sergeants outside and the brusque throwing open of the truck's doors. The train had stopped at some small country station; the first cold spikes of sunlight were striking upwards beyond a landscape frozen stiff—trees and fences furry with hoar frost; a great forest was in the east, and from somewhere behind it there came a ceaseless grumbling sound, puissant but distant, rising and falling in undulating curves that affected the ear as a wide tract of long rollers or a far-off sky-line of low downs affects the eye.

" Thet's artillery, thet is," Cart said to his awakening men as, one by one, they ceased rubbing their eyes and listened, amazed at the continuity and slow dignity of it;

they were like urban children taken into a pinewood and listening in admiration and awe to the low soughing murmur that never ceases overhead, be the day never so windless—till this awe was dissolved in the returning outpour of queries and chaff. "Wot stytion, Corp?" "Chynge for Wipers?" "Wot! All chynge?" "'Ere, porter!" "Keb! keb!"

From that place to the front it was a three-day march, and the first day was good. The ground was iron with frost; it rang underfoot, and the white nap that thickened every twig of the trees made the country look Christmas-cardy and jolly.

The men marched all day with the big Forest of Nieppe between them and the low thunderous grumble that rolled and rumbled beyond it in the east. Being new to the game, most of them listened, for most of the time, to that eternal mumbling in the distance and drank deep of the sense of being at last where they had longed to be. "The Lorrd is varra gude," said Ruthven, almost to himself, after an hour or two of silent satisfaction.

"Aye, Jock," the White Hope agreed. "We're through wi' plain stoof now."

Booker concurred. "Thet's raht. Pyin' aht all the tahm, thet's wot we been. Pyin' aht. Froo the nowse. Nah we'll get a bit o' value."

On that day of frost and sun they marched a good fourteen miles, with heavenly interludes when the "Company cookers," or kitchens on wheels, shed perfumes sweeter than rose or violet—the morning bacon, the mid-day stew, the evening tea, each divinely appropriate to its season. And then a new care visited the Section's anxious parents, Cart and Auberon. What would to-night's barn billet be like? Many holes in the roof? A good depth of straw, or thin? And the farmer's wife—would she let them all sit in the warm kitchen?

They reached their night's quarters at dusk, and Auberon, fortified on the linguistic side by Victor, set out across the dungy farmyard to the house, to be nice to the farmer's wife, while the other thirty men of Number One and Number Two Sections waited in the chilly darkness of the barn, in agonies of suspense.

The embassage prospered—not through Auberon's eloquence. It was at the sight of Victor's face, now nearly dead white, with broad zones of black round the eyes, that the stout woman's first hesitation seemed to collapse into a look of pity. "Mais entrez, entrez," she said; "oui, oui, tous les camarades. Entrez seulement." The woman looked at Victor all the time, mothering him with her eyes.

Auberon sped across to the barn with the news, and the tired men clodhopped joyfully into the kitchen, each wiping his boots conscientiously at the door and saying "Bong swore, Madame," like a good child at a party. There they sat and smoked and behaved nicely and drank little earthenware bowls of inexpressibly weak coffee for the good of the house, at a penny a bowl. The goodwife's son was a French infantryman discharged after the famous victory on the Marne, where he had left a leg. He drew Victor into a long fluent talk in which the words "Anglais" and "retraite" kept on recurring very often. Somehow or other the British listeners gathered that to the one-legged Frenchman their own British vision of France as a little boy saved from a vicious German bull by a gallant adult Britain was not quite so present as it should be.

"There down't seem to be quite so much bleat abaht English 'eroes o' Mons, this side o' the water," Booker said reflectively, when the men were curled up in the straw for the night.

"No thenkfulness at all, it seems to me," said little Smythe severely.

V

The weather broke that night and the battalion fell in, after breakfast, in violent rain.

An order had come round for the men to parade in great-coats. Captain Black was furious; he knew that nothing but waterproof ground-sheets, worn like loose capes, were of use on such days. But what could he do? Colonel's orders.

In half an hour the greatcoats were soaked. Then the rain held up for a while, but the thick, spongy greatcoats acted as forests and glaciers do; they kept up the water supply when the rain failed; the men's shirts got no chance of drying on them before the rain came again. So, both when it poured and when it did not, the maximum weight of rain water was carried by all.

As things grew worse, the men resorted to chaff. It was not brilliant; still, the menaced fortress of cheerfulness had to be actively defended. "Are ye thinkin', Jock," said McGurk, "ye'd better ha' left the wife's carpet slippers at home, on the pianny?" Every soldier knows, in the field, what every comrade has in his pack; is it not all tumbled out, of a night, in the straw?

Ruthven replied, "If it's barrgains ye're huntin', I'm no sellin'."

"Is ut me carry your ould brogues from this to Berlin?" said McGurk. "I'd as lief be thransportin' Turmits' library."

It was an open secret that Turmits, bitten with the love of knowledge, carried about him a tiny red manual, *English and French Conversation.*

Three miles farther on, McGurk was grossly shamming fatigue. No one had ever seen McGurk tired. No one could hope to. Still, when friends were visibly fagged, the

sociable Celt would simulate weariness, by way of standing in. "Ould St. Martin's the lad," he grunted, "the way he got shut of wan half of his greatcoat."

"Saint!" the dour Scottish Calvinist jeered. "He desairved to be clappit into the jug for mutilation of kit."

A fresh fury of rain, teeming down in straight rods, closed all lips for a time. When it slackened a little, Booker announced, "I've a steel shyvin' mirror I'd give awye to the poor."

There was no ugly rush for the proffered gift. Other men, too, were counting their burdens just then by the ounce and considering which of their private possessions they would miss least if they should throw it away. "A mirror! To shave wi'!" groaned the descendant of Covenanters, reprovingly. "Arrch oop your back, mon, to your load o' womanish vanities. Dook your head doon an' be damned to appairances!"

Many men were marching already with their heads and shoulders bent well down and thrust far forward, to let their packs rest balanced on the upper part of the back and ease the cut of the straps into the shoulders. Booker marched upright. "Thenk Gawd," he said, "for one bloody thing. Th' emminition pouches pulls you forrard so's you won't fall down on yer beckside, an' the pack stops the pouches 'aulin' you down on to yer belly."

"Thet's compensytion, thet is," said Corporal Cart. "Thet's 'ow they built the Forf Bridge, up in Scotland, yn't it, Beak?" Victor seemed not to hear.

The afternoon rain was less vehement, but more assiduous. Sweating and drenched and weighted down with the rain-water that had added itself to each man's original equipment, the men opened their tunics and shirts at the neck for relief; the moisture smoked off their bare chests in little clouds; over

the whole column a long mist of steam rose as it does from a flock of sheep driven hard in wet weather.

Eleven miles had been marched when the road took a turn for the worse. So far it had been made of pretty flat dirt. It was now made of stone setts; its surface heavily cambered or arched. These setts were thoroughly greased with chalky mud. So the right-hand half of the road, where they marched, was a slippery convex slope falling from left to right; the marching men felt as if they were always slipping down to the right, like boats edging off sideways from a wind. "Like mawchin' a-top o' Charin' Crorse Stytion," Booker said with disgust. All the Section felt it, but none quite so manifestly as Victor. The hateful sensation of making leeway, in spite of himself, towards the ditch on the right of the road seemed to have got on his nerves. Every few minutes he shuffled anxiously leftward, scraping spasmodically with the left edges of his soles so as to prop himself up towards the crown of the road, and slanting his body to the left so much as to risk a fall. He was breathing hard, his mouth open, his eyes full of torment, his skin sodden and dull bluish-white like a laundress's hands after a day in hot water and soda.

Sergeant Fulford always had an eye on every man in the platoon, and two apiece on Auberon and on Victor. Auberon was the fittest-looking man in sight. Victor was so much the opposite that Fulford was leaving his own place in the middle of the platoon to give Victor the tip to shift cargo a bit and not list to port, when the surprising order "March at attention" came back from the Colonel, who rode alone at the head of the column.

There was a blind corner just at the point the Colonel had reached; so he had seen, before any one else, a group of four mounted officers waiting on the left, beside the road. One of them bore a Lieutenant-General's badge: all wore

the red and white armlet of a Corps Staff. The General's horse stood facing the road, some six feet in front of the others.

The slipping and steaming men pulled themselves together desperately, so as to round that corner with credit. They braced up every weary muscle as tight as it would go; they tried hard to fling their heads round to the left, when the order came, with the almost defiant swing that leaves the head vibrating at the swing's end. As Auberon's eyes sheered round, in this gesture of homage, and fell on the sleek, demure horses and on the trim red and gold of the riders' gorgets and caps, he saw that one of these magnificent figures was Claude, and that Claude was wearing the M.C. ribbon, and another too.

"Jove!" Auberon thought, behind his dutifully wooden face. "Old Claude must have put up a lot of good work." He fancied that A.D.C. jobs were given to signally valiant persons now disabled by wounds. He was trying to see whether Claude had still got both his arms when a horrible scraping of iron on stone, behind his own right shoulder, took off his attention. His rigidly fixed eyes might not be diverted, but somehow he knew that Victor had lost his nerve again and had worked up another of those desperate scuffles between his boots and the greased setts. And then, instantly, two men in Number Two Section caught the infection of anxiety, scraped abominably, and lost step.

The Corps Commander's face darkened. And was he not wronged? Had he not, on a beastly day, come out to give the men a sight of their commander? And here were they marching like a damned labour battalion and wounding the honest pride that a good commander loves to take in his men.

Presently Claude came cantering forward along the vacant left half of the road, his horse's hoofs flinging mud in the

eyes of the left-flank men of the column. He certainly had all his four limbs. He spoke to the Colonel, who turned back with him at once and was riding with Claude towards the rear when the Corps commander himself came trotting up and met them, almost abreast of Auberon. "It's bad march discipline, Colonel Stowell," the General said. "Damned bad. The saluting too!—rotten! We *must* get these things right or we'll never do anything. Take 'em back to-morrow—back half-way to where you started to-day. Make 'em march it again."

The General rode away, consoled by the subtle luxury of having been a Roman father. A low rumble of growls and curses pervaded the leading platoon. "Lot 'e knows abaht mawchin'!" "Settin' up there on a good 'orse!" "Bloody ol' geyser!" "Gawd send 'im piles!" Auberon had heard how French Revolutionary mobs would lug nobles out of their chariots and lynch them ecstatically. He felt now that he could see how they came to do that, though of course it was a rotten thing to do.

VI

That was a bad day, to the finish. As the bedraggled men of the Section trailed away slowly in the dusk, under dripping poplars, to their allotted barn, it seemed to Auberon that a good kitchen stove could never before, in human history, have been quite so worthy an object of adoration. Just to sit beside it! To feel the cold wetness become a warm wetness round your body! But no. The farmer's wife was stony. English soldiers had been there before, she told the supplicating Auberon, and they had got drunk and broken two chairs.

Auberon called up Victor from the soiled straw on which he had flopped down in all his equipment, too utterly spent even to slip the straps off his shoulders. "I should have

thought——" Victor began to reply in a weakly querulous voice. That had always been one of Victor's pet formulas. In the good old days it had been gently ironic, serving to introduce some piece of high wisdom ignored by the vulgar. Now no doubt he "would have thought" that the British Army's rulers would not leave its men to beg for the billeted soldier's immemorial right to a place by the fire. But he did not go on; he rose with Auberon's help and limped across the yard and pleaded his best, in his best French, like Columbine at Pierrot's door:

Ouvre-moi ta porte
Pour l'amour de Dieu.

The woman looked at him as women usually did. If it were he alone——! But no; her vision of the rowdy men and the two ruined chairs reasserted itself. The envoys went back defeated, to tell the shivering men in the barn.

The general grunt of disappointment was almost a wail. "Ow! Chrahyst!" Booker lamented, as all the dreadful implications of their exclusion from Paradise came home to him. "Ne'er a drawr o' baccy all the night, not withaht ya sit aht on the dung 'eap, gettin' yer death." Every one knew how Cart would enforce the order against smoking in straw.

Under the Corporal's lead the men stuffed up the chinks in the lath-and-mud walls of the barn, to keep in all their hot breath. Some took off all their clothes, hung them over the rafters and wormed their naked bodies deep into the straw, regardless of the misery of putting on the cold wet clothes in the morning. Others burrowed equally deep in the straw, but with all their clothes on, for wet clothes do not matter so long as you keep warm in spite of them; besides they will nearly dry in a night; others tried to get

the best of both courses by stripping and then drying their garments, one at a time, under their bodies.

When all were in the straw they discussed the war and God and the deficiencies of their superiors, with contumacious pungency. They sang the scoffing songs of the hour:

When this bloody war is over,
We won't soldier any more,

and

Oh my! I don't want to die.
I want to go 'ome.

Bowell, after careful calculation, announced the poignant discovery that it was Saturday night.

"Well, any'ow, there yn't no church paride to-morrer," said Corporal Cart, ever eager to persuade the men of his command that even in the darkest hour there were some few stars of hope or consolation to be descried.

Capel, the tenor, came to his assistance gallantly in this work of mercy. He wheedled the men into reviving, for once, a kind of rude part-singing that had amused them long ago in their happy hut in Essex, after Lights Out. "Sweet and Low" was the piece that did best; it is sentimental and all soldiers are sentimental, behind their scoffs, especially when they are tired. They crooned as much of it now as they could remember:

Sweet and low, sweet and low,
Wind of the western sea,
Low, low, breathe and blow,
Wind of the western sea!
Over the rolling waters go,
Blow her again to me.

Auberon found himself extraordinarily moved as one additional man after another joined his voice to the rest. Exquisite people, living in comfort and pleased with nothing

short of the best, may be somewhat haughty about sentimental verses and tunes. To simpler organisms, with an almost wholly physical life, some trailing and sugared melody may become a window suddenly opened, through which they can see lost worlds of beauty and peace. A kind of fervour of naïve tenderness grew on the voices of the men as they caressed the honeyed melody:

Sleep and rest, sleep and rest;
Father will come to thee soon;
Rest, rest, on mother's breast,
Father will come to thee soon.

When it ended, nobody spoke or moved; Auberon knew, for a man lying in straw cannot make the slightest movement without rustling. For himself he lay in ecstasy, feeling somehow the quickened beat of all the hearts that were keeping, each to itself, the common secret of their emotion.

The barn, with all its major cracks and holes caulked, grew frowsty at last with the fetid steam of clothes drying on hot and dirty bodies. The stinking warmth began to drug man after man. Auberon was just dropping off, with his mind full of beautiful thoughts, when a repeated sound, quite near him, began to express clearly the fact that some one was tossing restlessly, with convulsive rustlings in the straw each time he shifted from one side to the other. Auberon called softly "Vick!"

"Yes?" came a wakeful voice.

"Not going to sleep?" Auberon asked.

"Who could—in this Black Hole of Calcutta?"

Either Cart had not slept yet, or he awakened instantly now like a mother whose child cries in the night. "Cawn't yer get to bye-bye, Beak?" he said. "'Ave one o' these." He was rummaging out a little electric flash-lamp; he turned the light on his haversack and produced from its depths a

small bottle with white tablets in it. He shook one out into the lid and passed this to Victor. "Thet's hasp'rin, thet is. Sends yer orf when yer exorsted past yer sleep. My young lidy gev me thet, 'long o' morphiar an' stuff to tike if I got wounded pineful an' lef' out. They work it out a lot, do women — wot might 'appen to yer. Thet's imaginytion, thet is."

Victor stretched an eager hand. "Two—" he said, "can you spare?"

Cart gave him two tablets. "Shouldn't tike no more than two, if I was you," he said. "These pick-me-ups 'as narsty little wyes o' gettin' back on yer."

In ten minutes Victor, though still tossing, was tossing in his sleep. And then the parents of the family could go asleep too.

CHAPTER XIX

I

AT the end of their fourth day of marching the Comfies reached what were called reserve trenches. These were not trenches at all. For the British front at the time was a bluff. Only a front trench and a support trench existed. Behind these no line had been dug. Reserve trenches only meant the cellars of Pully-la-Fosse, a mining village now half ruined by the enemy's intermittent shelling. The British front trench lay two miles farther east, so it was part of the business of enemy guns to make Pully-la-Fosse a place of discomfort.

Each house had one roomy cellar, and holes had been hacked in the party wall between each cellar and the next, so as to turn all the cellars of each row of houses into one long underground gallery. Thus Fulford, who happened to be the Company Orderly Sergeant of the week, could pass underground from end to end of a long terrace in five minutes and see the whole of A Company bedded down in the straw, in darkness, a cellar to each section. At five o'clock he came along in this way, stooping through the low manholes from cellar to cellar; he had a lighted candle in one hand and a bit of dirty paper in the other and called out: "Pay attention, all." The men had got their harness off and were just beginning to steam themselves dry. In the stricken silence that suddenly fell he gave out the order: "Following men fall in at Quartermaster's Store at six o'clock to carry water up to the front line." The exhausted men in Number One Section held their breath for the names. But none of theirs was read out except Bowell's.

"Well, thot's a corf-drop, thot is," Bowell remarked, without rancour.

"Fall in right-flank man at the Q. Store," Fulford

advised, "and you'll be the first man of this crowd to get to the front."

"Thot's reet, Sergeant," said Bowell, with gusto.

About 5.30 Fulford came stooping through again. "Following men fall in at Quartermaster's Store at 8 to-night—rationing party to trenches." All the remaining men in Number One Section, except McGurk, Nevin, Booker and Ruthven, were warned for this liturgy.

Before six o'clock Fulford revisited them: "Following men fall in at 8 o'clock, to act as mule leaders, with rationing party: Booker, McGurk, Nevin, Ruthven. An issue of rum will be made on return to all men on these three fatigues."

II

Victor had liked horses and ridden them well. But, to like a strange mule, you—or it—must be a rare and beautiful soul. And the laden mule that Victor led eastward in the dark, the last of a little train of six, was clearly at war with mankind. From the start on, the embittered hybrid made periodical lunges at Victor with bared teeth; the yellowy white of its eyes and the close lie of its ears back over its skull showed up nastily in a thin, watery moonlight.

Led by a disdainful scout from some more experienced unit, the party filed down a sunk road between lines of smashed and shredded trunks of trees that looked like shaving-brushes for extremely large giants. Then their guide struck off left, up a steep bank beside the road, and the 'prentice muleteers dragged and beat or kicked the mules up the bank till they reached an open level that felt strangely naked and hoisted up, after all their skulking in sunk road and cellar. Somehow the air here seemed to be infested or suspect, and Victor gathered that if they had been here in daylight they would have been under the enemy's eyes. Far ahead, in the east, there appeared to be something like a fitfully lighted

fair-ground viewed from the darkness outside it; a place where flaring lights, each of which means nothing particular to the person thus seeing it, move capriciously over some patch of ground spasmodically illuminated, now here and now there—and whence come isolated jarring sounds, reports from shooting-galleries and banging try-your-strength machines; a place with some sort of squalid and enigmatic animation of its own. Where they were, the ground's rough surface was greasy; the mules skated and slid, sweating and snorting with fright; still, no shells came to dismember or stifle.

Many small clouds were crossing the moon: one of these, a little thicker than the rest, covered the moon abruptly just before the party reached the wreckage of the older German front, taken by our troops two months before. The wary scout gave a lead through a small gap in the tangle of old barbed wire that sprawled about the slippery ground. Each man ahead of Victor followed the lead with the fanatical precision of the tyro eager to prove himself fit. Victor, not so alert, let his beast sidle a yard or so out of the narrow safe way. It put a forefoot into a chance loop of wire like a big rabbit snare, and it was down before Victor knew it was falling—sidelong, away from the cleared track and into a thick-set brake of jagged thorns and thongs of rusted metal.

The gently ironic attitude towards life offers no complete solution of the practical problem set by a vicious and terrified mule wallowing and plunging in an unbreakable net that spurs it wherever it presses. Victor, thinking of fallen horses in England, encouraged the beast to rise of itself. But this much it was attempting already. It writhed and strained like a cat that resents being held, and each kick or wriggle involved it only the more completely.

Word was passed up to the guide that the rear was no longer in touch. The scout halted the column and questions

and curses floated back westward, followed by the scout himself, a masterful lance-corporal. "'As some bloody swab gone an' thrown down 'is mule?" he asked bitterly. "You, there!" he called to one of the men, "'old them three mules." This liberated McGurk, Booker and Ruthven to serve as a breakdown gang. "You three," he said to them, "an' you, ya bleeder wot's done it," he added to Victor, "git dahn to it an' extricyte."

The scout himself took a seat on the frantic mule's head, brought a pair of nippers out of his pocket and began to cut away the strands of wire within his reach. The others held the beast down, leg by leg, under his orders, and then took turns to sit on its head while the scout went over the whole entanglement with his nippers. At intervals the mule broke into wild spasms of renewed endeavour to work out its own deliverance from its couch of thorns, and the men wrestled with it furiously, four of them snarling and swearing: "Garn, ya bleedin' bastard, lay still!" "Y'owld man-aitin' tiger, hittin' the moon wi' yer heels." "The Lorrd blast the pairvairsity o' these illegeetimate deevils!" Victor, in silence and bitterness, worked with the rest.

"Was the Beak swearin' at all?" McGurk asked Ruthven in a whisper, as soon as the whole caravan was again in motion.

"Not a damn that I hairrd," Ruthven replied.

"Nor I. Ut isn't natur'l. The lad's gettin' quare."

"Is that," Ruthven asked, "why ye're leadin' the rogue mule they got him from Hell?"

"It is not," said McGurk. "The baste's quiet. Wid all the holes he has in him he's too dejicted to offer to bite ye."

Victor caught his own name. So! They were talking about him? He thought "How could they not be?" Had he not mulled his first job at the front? In the catch-as-

catch-can wrestle in the slime between the five men and the tortured mule, he knew the others had held on more dourly than he and had taken more risks from the madly lunging heels of the beast. And then, like some passive creature, a child or sick person, he had let McGurk exchange mules and give Victor the meekest of the race. He trailed along, a battered mind in a quelled body, almost led by the meek mule.

III

By midnight the three fatigue parties were back in the cellars at Pully-la-Fosse; and under each man's belt two spoonfuls of neat rum, measured out by Fulford with scrupulous justice, were doing their kindly office. Victor, dead beat in body but snug in a warm nest of thought, could now appreciate with a luxurious glow of self-pity the tragic appeal of his case. Something or other was fearfully wrong: something had defrauded him: that journey to-night should have been like some wild adventure with strange hazards under the moon, in Scott or Dumas; the tussle with the frenzied mule in the cactus thicket of wire ought to have had the fantastic, transfigured horror of one of Victor Hugo's fine freaks of macabre invention. This sordid, brutalising life was no honest substitute for that glamorous life of the thrilled imagination, the passionate heart and the unjaded body—the true life of war, the real historic thing, known and attested by all generations, the splendour and gloom of old battles in the Peninsula and of Marlborough's Low Country campaigns and of the fatal night falling on thronged and surrounded Sedan. In these stinking cellars and out on these blasted heaths there was only the letter of glorious war without its spirit, only the dry bones of gallant enterprise, not its breath and complexion. He was profoundly moved by this sight of himself as the most tragic of all heroes—a man who had somehow strayed into an out-of-gear world where

causes were cheated of their effects, and great and noble things were no longer their true selves and all grandeur was forfeit, and reality's self was drained dry of its essence, and sorry counterfeits had taken the place of the authentic springs of beauty and joy. O, it was very good rum, the best that was then to be bought in the whole world.

IV

Reverie passed into dreaming and did not quite cease till Fulford came walking and stooping along the dark underground gallery at Réveillé, to give out the day's orders: breakfast in half an hour; then a platoon rifle inspection; then all of Number One Section to fall in for another fatigue —hand-grenades to be carried up to the front.

As all Victor's movements were lifeless, his rifle was only half-clean when little Mellett, with Fulford behind him, came round to inspect. He looked down the unshining barrel and said, rather reproachfully, "No credit, that, to your officer." Then he passed on and left Victor hating his clemency. Why the Hell, Victor sourly wondered, was he not punished? Oh, he supposed, Mellett was making allowance; Mellett was tempering the wind; Mellett was listing him as one of the crocks who had to be pulled through by not asking too much of them. Horrible notion! Victor brooded over it while he hobbled away from the inspection parade to fall in for the fatigue.

The men's loads were not crushing, for men strong and fit—half a sackful apiece of boxes of Mills bombs, to be carried by each man the best way he could. Where the mule party had left the high road, the daylight party entered a slit cut in the road's high eastern bank. It was the rearward end of a long and deep communication trench. In all of it there was some water to splash through: half a mile of it was flooded three feet deep. Along its centre ran a

narrow and slippery strip of submerged duck-board. Any man who slipped off this and chanced on one of the many holes in the clay bed of the trench might sink in up to his armpits. Victor did this twice. At a third stumble he fell altogether and was for a moment right under water. His cap was retrieved and wrung out by Smythe; McGurk carried Victor's fardel of bombs while Victor wrung out his own tunic.

By three o'clock in the afternoon they were back in the cellars. Victor flopped down on the straw; wet and cold might go hang: he must sleep, only sleep. He did, for half an hour; and then he was awaked by his chattering teeth and the qualmish chill of the wet clothes round his stomach and chest. He found Cart was inspecting him solemnly. "Tike orf yer trahsies an' pents an' yer shirt," Cart advised him. "Shove 'em in the strawr, under yer. Thet'll dry 'em. Then you lay where y'are an' curl yer legs up inside o'yer gritecowt. Thet'll warm yer."

Victor did it. The Corporal laid his own greatcoat on the top of the little pile of Victor and his belongings. Victor was thawing out well when tea came from the cookers, glorious and hot. If only a whole day's rest could have come, Victor might have weathered the vexed promontory beyond which the stolidly enduring soldier's body and spirit find that weary vessels can just struggle on, just afloat.

But circumstances had not that kindness. Fulford had dished out every one's tea except his own when he was abruptly called away: new orders had come and he must go round at once and give them out in all the billets. The Company was to have moved up into the front line the next day. But Intelligence thought that word had got round to the enemy of the exact day and hour of this intended relief. So it had to be changed, lest the enemy should bombard the

front trench at the critical moment of the relief, when the trench would be thronged with both the relieved and the relievers. Accordingly A Company was to pack up and start for the firing-line within half an hour. The men gobbled their tea and made ready to go. They were all tired, but what did it matter? At last they were going, as fighting men, into the line. They had long lived for this; now they revived for it.

Victor found that he could just stand up, under his pack and equipment, and stump along stiffly to where the Company was to fall in, on the safe west side of a row of half-ruined houses. Eighty pounds had become an incredibly heavier load within the last week. A loose kerb-stone lay in his path as he plodded along: he lifted a foot carefully high to step over its three or four vertical inches of stumbling-block.

V

Drugged as he was with weariness, Victor was carried by soldier habit through the motions of falling in, numbering off and stepping out with the rest. The next thing he felt was a sudden jog and a bewilderment. Capel was pulling him by the arm. "Come round at the curves, old son," Capel, the tenor, was saying with a queer gaiety. "Curves o' beauty, you know; curves o' beauty," Capel maundered on, strangely.

Everything was strange. "I must have been asleep," thought Victor. Yes, he had read in Napier's *Peninsular War*—was it not there?—how men would sleep on the march—and sometimes march straight on, at a bend in a road, and go into the ditch. He thought he could even remember where he had read that—in his old room at Skimmery, with the lamp burning steady and the firelight leaping a little, and a tide of exultant fortitude, sympathetic fortitude, high in his own heart. Oh, confound! Capel

was tugging his arm again. He roused himself more and looked round and tried to make everything out.

The Company had marched off into the east in the last flush of sunset. The road they were taking lay broad and white between derelict fields. It had none of the usual roadside poplars of France to screen any daylight movement upon it. So A Company ought, strictly, to have marched by sections, with fifty yards or more between each and the next, to limit the kill of any enemy shell that might pitch on the road. But that would have meant a little delay in arrival. And they had been warned not to be late. And Black had not had one loss yet to make him the Rachel that every good Company officer is in a war, mourning the sons that he might not have lost if he had done something or other not quite as he did. So the only precaution he took was to march his men in file instead of fours. This had brought Victor next to Capel in the rear file of Number One Section.

Capel was talking more oddly than ever—out of some state of beatitude, as it seemed. "We've rolled the pitch," he was saying, "till we were tired, and slaved away at the nets, and trained and fielded, and now, by God, we're going in." For the first time he was speaking like a man wholly at ease and not consciously worsted and shamed. Everybody in the Section knew his record—how he had seemed, a year or two since, to stand at the opening door of success as an operatic tenor, and how, one night, when the King and Queen were to be in the house, he had taken just the least drop too much, to make sure of his nerves, and the King and Queen had seen and had got up from their chairs and left the theatre, and how the luckless son of the morning had not retrieved that first slip from his first footing in heaven. But to-night he was no blurred and ineffectual copy of a man, but radiant, strong and complete as his own singing

voice, which had always seemed so full and round and ringing with the puissant wholeness of virility.

A clap that was more of a thud—it was so big and yet muted—came from somewhere out in the blasted fields on their right. "An honest effort," Capel said jocundly, with his eyes all a-sparkle. He pointed to where a black haystack, with a heavy list to leeward, was rising, expanding and drifting away as a less densely black cloud. Then a sound like calico tearing began in the distance, approached in a great hurry, and ended abruptly in just such another thud and rising black haystack, about as far out on their left as the first had been on their right.

Capel was exulting. "Baptism of fire. 'Power and strength to have victory.'" His voice had both triumph and peace in it—a kind of ecstatic blessedness of arrival.

Captain Black came running back from the head of the column. "Step out, men," he commanded, with trouble in his voice. Near Victor he spoke low to Mellett. "Keep your men moving. That bloody gunner's bracketing on us." He ran on towards the rear, to make the two rear platoons double past the bad spot on the road, section by section.

Somewhere, no doubt, a tiny thing like a dead leaf blown about the violet depths of the sky had been watching them, with its tale-bearing voice prompting some German battery commander who sat before a big table and, now that twilight was come, cast the glare of his flash-lamp about a big map. Fired from far north, the first of the two ranging shells had overshot the road by a neat hundred yards; the second had pitched a neat hundred short of it. No great arithmetical genius was required to drop a third shell just half-way between these two.

It pitched right in the middle of Number Two Section. So the burst was somewhere behind Victor's back. But he

saw it as you see a strong flash of lightning, whichever way you may be looking: the great splash of flame filled the whole field of vision. A rush of hot air pushed against the back of his neck; and then the flame was gone and night had suddenly come, where only twilight had been—night turbid with an acrid-smelling smoke and speckled with black objects, incredible objects—rifles, lumps of earth, blocks of stone sett, whole men, bits of men, all falling through the air.

One of the harder of these falling things must have fetched Victor a blow on the head and knocked him out of his senses. When he became conscious again he was lying, face down, on the road, in a world that had changed a great deal. There were no marching men before, beside or behind him; no tremendous imperative in him and round him was forcing him on, step by step; there was no sound about him except the old sleepy rumble of distant guns and, near and anxious and urgent, a weak imploring voice, "O Christ, pity her." Victor knew the voice for that of Bill Haines, of Number Two Section, a little milkman from Sunbury—a man always unconcealably worried by fears for his wife, who was doing his work as well as her own since he enlisted; he had told Auberon she was "expecting."

Victor turned a little, with an effort, so that his right cheek lay in the mud, instead of his nose. A big moon that had long been high in the sky had now brightened. Its light leaping out from behind rags of fast-moving cloud showed Haines half-naked and disembowelled; as moonlight shines on a lake, it shone on what was lying spilt on the road in front of Haines' belly and attached to it.

"Haines!" Victor called, and then "Bill!" which he had never called Haines before.

But Haines, too, was speaking and getting no answer. "O Christ, be kind to her! O, suffering Christ, think of her!" So he went on entreating the winter sky till his

voice weakened down to a mumble and stopped. Victor had shut his eyes again, thinking: "Am I, too, like that? When I move, shall I feel a warm trickle running down inside my clothes?" He did not move. If he was a mere fragment now, a man drawn and quartered alive, he could still put off knowing it, just for that moment.

A rhythmical distant tramp rose on his ear while he lay; it approached; an order was shouted: "Keep in to the left there!" and a column of troops came edging past the muddle of abattoir refuse in which he lay. Some of the marching men gave little grunts or snorts, like scared horses; the breath of others was laboured or held; they were raw troops and had not learned to take one of these little messes as if it were only the spill of feathers or baby fur left on the grass by a hawk. A boy's voice that tried to sound jolly and hard sang out, "Get on there, men. They're dead as mutton. You there, carry on marching"; some man had fallen out to vomit.

That must be C Company, going up to join A. All of it passed: the tramp of the rear platoon died away to the east, up the road. He had kept dead still all the time, lying half in the ditch and half on the road, as he had fallen. Why? He was not sure. Partly, perhaps, from some decent impulse not to bleat about his plight to people with bigger work in hand than to look after him. Partly from a reluctance, in the flesh or in the soul, to relinquish its suddenly gotten place of rest, its retreat from all the broil and bale that might come back when once bodily motion returned. "Dead as mutton"—let it go at that; let everything go, just for the moment. He fell fast asleep.

VI

He awoke with his teeth chattering uncontrollably. Rain must have fallen; his clothes were soaked; they cased him

in iciness; paroxysms of shuddering ran through his limbs, trunk and jaws, in a kind of convulsive wave. Was he dying of cold? Or—why, it might be loss of blood; he had never found out whether his sore body was whole or a stump or a botched remnant of smashed bones and perforated entrails. One of his hands tickled a little; he felt it with the other. Yes, tepid drops were running over it. Not his own blood, though. Groping about, his hand touched another hand, then grasped it, and lo! the other hand came away with no arm or body behind it—just a loose hand, with six inches of wrist, and with a big ring on one finger, lying on the road. Still, the hand was not his: that was all right. Cautiously feeling his limbs and trunk, he made sure he was complete; he could not find even a wound.

He half rose on one elbow and took a look round. For the moment the moon was a bright island in a ragged-shored lake of clear sky. It shone on the sweat of Bill Haines' upturned face, with its bulging eyes and dropped jaw, already stiff, and on Capel's body, no way mutilated or bloody, only limp and forlorn like that of a mouse kicked to death in the dust.

With a struggle Victor rose to his feet. Yes, he could stand all right; he was weak and shaky; still, he could stand. And then he found, with horror, that he had been half wishing he couldn't. How would it look if he were found loitering here, unhurt, and telling a pretty yarn about how he had fainted on the way up to the front? Had not men been shot for less? And that lying still of his, when C Company passed—was it not really an act of malingering? What on earth was he to do? He tried to think, but his terrified mind, fretting in his tired body, only worked itself up to new frenzies of panic. But he *must* think, he *must* frame some plan of action; and, to do that, he must get away first, if only for a few minutes, from this bullying and

quelling cold that took all the pluck and the wits out of a man. But how to do it?—how to do it?

At the height of his distress a new sound reached him. More marching feet—from the west like the others, but this time only a small body of men. A Provost-Sergeant's party?—out gleaning deserters? The very thought threw him into mad panic. He plunged away from the road, forgetting even his rifle, scrambled on all fours across the hedgeless ditch and staggered weakly out into the scarred waste of weeds, stooping as low as he could, just to be out of sight for a few minutes, only a few minutes, just to make up his mind what to say.

He had hardly staggered thirty yards when he stumbled, head foremost, into an old shell-hole, half-full of water. The new terror he felt, lest the splash he made should be heard, assured him more crushingly than anything yet that he was a criminal now, who could live on, like vermin, only by not letting any one see, hear or smell them. Making a mighty effort with his spent muscles, he drew himself cautiously out of the cold water, dragged himself up the hole's slimy clay slope and peered over its lip. He found that he was doing all this with a furtive animal cunning, a rat's or a beetle's, that he had never known himself to possess: he loathed it while he used it. He peered towards the road; he put a hand to his ear.

The marching party halted, to his terror, just where he had left the road. Something wooden, that only made a slight noise, was put down; there were irregular footfalls, no longer in step, grumbles and grunts of distaste, then a few audible words.

"'Ere's an 'ole one, Puddin'. Warm, 'e is."

"Warm! Ya silly swine! 'E's offed it more'n an hour."

Pudding, Pudding? Why, that was the nickname of Punt, who used to bang the big drum of the Comfies' band until

active service stilled its music and turned all the bandsmen into stretcher-bearers. Why, of course——. There were voices again. "Gawd, if they ain't gutted Bill 'Aines!" "'Im that 'ad a lot o' chat about 'is missus?" "No more little 'alf-pints along o' Bill 'Aines."

Victor almost shouted, almost rushed forward to join them. Then he delayed a moment longer. He was not sure of them. Would they say they had found him skulking about in the rear of the line, just when his Company had gone in? You see, he did not know them—had never really fraternised with his fellows—not even enough to know that all privates are tacitly leagued together to avert from any one of themselves the major severities of the law—no more than he knew how courts-martial, for all their grim looks, will struggle until the going down of the sun to find some excuse for the poor brother-in-arms who has failed. And just then the voices dropped rather queerly, became confidential, with ugly chuckling guffaws and an audible word now and then—"ticker" and "ring" among others, and then an admiring exclamation, "Ya bloody ol' robber! Pinchin' it orf a loose 'and!"

"'Pity to wyste it.'" Pudding's voice brazenly hummed the refrain of a music-hall song in honour of taking a chance to steal whenever you got it.

"They're robbing the dead," Victor thought, remembering the ring on that stray hand. "The brutes! The beasts! I suppose they'd murder me if they knew I had heard." To the man who had lived remote from real life and from common men it did not occur that these comrades of his were doing their duty substantially well all the time, and that if shells had been falling around they would have gone on with it still, stoical, ribald, good-natured and graceless, pilferers and heroes. Whilst he shrank back into his shell-hole in fastidious horror he dimly heard the bearers

grunting filthy conjunctions with the name of Christ as the weights of the loaded stretchers came on their shoulders. A slovenly order to march was given, and soon the last diminishing sound of the plodding boots died out in the West. Capel and Haines and a dozen others had gone back the way that they came, and the tensity of Victor's fear could relax enough to let him feel all the chill that was deadening his body.

He supposed that it was the final ebb beginning : before dawn he would be lying just where he was now, but with his mouth rigidly a-gape like that of Haines—dead of exposure, nabbed by God in the act of deserting—that was how it would look. No; that was too dreadful. He struggled to his feet and stared round. In the east the line of the front was marked by an endless succession of rocket-like lights. In the west and the south was absolute darkness. But in the north there was something amazing. Not more, it seemed, than 400 yards off, a light burned dull but steady. It had irregular edges; it looked turbid—just like the light of some window screened with ragged curtain stuff or sacking, perhaps with one candle within.

A window? A house, a fire perhaps, possibly wine, and dry straw to lie on, and time to think out the right thing to do, like a man and not a frozen worm. The vision of that modest heaven revived him and drew him along, excited and breathless. "Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom." He was weak and fell twice, and could hardly get up with the weight of the water in his clothes added to his seventy pounds of equipment and ammunition. But he rose each time and went stumbling and shambling along through the deep weeds of the bogged fields, seeking the light, like some queer clodhopping moth.

CHAPTER XX

I

VICTOR struck against a low wooden fence as he drew near the light. He made out the dark bulk of a house, framing the one lighted window. The outline of the house was dim against some other and larger dark bulk behind it and east of it—the cliff-like side, as it seemed, of some great quarry. Ah! that, no doubt, was why this one house was not smashed by enemy shells: it was screened.

By feel he found a gate in the fence and entered a farmyard; so much he knew by the stink and warm sweat of the dung-heap piled in the centre. He waded carefully through the puddles of ooze from the dung, lest he fall, reached the lighted window, felt about with his hands on the wall till he hit on a door, and knocked, very gently, so as to cause no alarm. Nothing happened. So he knocked more and more loudly, listening hard between each knock and the next. Nobody came to the door, but at last a dulled voice called, in French, "Come in," and he pressed down the latch.

The door let him into a little square room with a very hot iron stove and a lamp. That room was a sheer cube of heat and light, a veritable hoard of the good contraband stuff that was first run by Prometheus. In it a woman of, perhaps, thirty or so was working alone and absorbedly at some laundrying job. At Victor's entry and salutation she merely stared for a moment without any expression of welcome, surprise, alarm, or anything else, and then went on with her work, as an English labourer's wife might do if the cat had come in.

Might he sit down for a minute or two, Victor asked courteously, in his immaculate French. She pointed, with-

out cordiality, to a chair by the stove, and he flopped into it, collapsing into himself like a sack half full of apples. The chair was hard, but it had arms—divine things, arms to a chair—and a low back; his pack could rest on the back, with its murderous weight off his shoulders. And oh! it was warm by that fire; it brought life back; it turned each moment into a separate pearl on a lengthening string of felicity. The heat and rest drugged him at once; his eyelids were pulled down like blinds drawn with strings. But to sleep there would be rude: besides, he mustn't stay long—only just long enough to compose himself for his return to his own difficult world. While he tried to hold his eyes open he gazed musingly at the taciturn woman.

She was a woman of large make, a figure of ripe, embrowned force and fertility such as sculptors model to symbolise Asia or Earth. Her features were large and well formed; the face, as a whole, inanimate, like a fine bronze lamp unlit. Her shape was the wonder. Over its Junonian splendour of contour her worn peasant dress ran loose or tight here and there as if to illustrate some cruel jibe at the vulgar and impotent feminine forms that cheap wholesale clothing has to be made for.

Victor's drowsily glazing eyes may have rested on her long enough to make some patch of her conscious, as a weak burning-glass will. She paused in her work, stared at him harshly, and then came over and opened a little door in the iron case of the stove. Through the aperture there burst a jet of fiery horizontal light, full on Victor's face, showing up fiercely its pallor and exhaustion and its indefeasible beauty.

He said, "Thank you, Madame"; at first he had called her Mademoiselle, but had seen her ring in the light from the stove. She did not answer. She had gone back to her work in the more shadowy half of the room. Oh! the

endless work of these country women in France!—Victor mused on it as his waking consciousness sank under the opiate glow from the stove; a dulling, killing life to use up creatures like this statue-woman with her big classic face formed to express great emotions and yet as void and dreary as any great theatre when it is empty, the tragedy over, the lights out, the whole cavernous house left to the spiders and the night watchman. Oh! good God!—what hand was that on his shoulder? He had awaked with a start from his doze.

Some one—oh! that woman, of course—was undoing one of his shoulder-strap buttons, and easing the straps of his pack off his shoulders. He shifted himself a little, to concur with her movements. From her standing height she looked down at his face, with an air of distaste, and then poured a little milk into a saucepan, put it to boil on the fire, and brought out a packet of coffee, doing it all like a person who feels "Well, I suppose I have got to." When the coffee was made she said "Drink," and gave him a little bowlful, as if he were a child that nobody wanted but some one or other must keep alive somehow.

"Oh, thank you. You're good," Victor said weakly, in his good French.

While he drank she surveyed him, always with the same hard, incurious aspect.

The hot, weak coffee finished the work of the fire. Tight strings seemed to be loosening themselves luxuriously through all his thawed, comatose body. He was less able to exert himself than ever, and yet he was better; he could think better; he could call up lost joys more clearly. Why, there were beds still in the world: just think of a bed!

"Tired, tired, tired," his voice began to dribble like a child's, uncontrollably.

"Must rest," the woman said curtly, in her clipped French. "Must go to bed now."

II

Bed! That miraculous word! But he could almost have cried at her uncompassionate voice. To over-tired children an ungentle nurse seems terribly hard. He struggled to rise, failed; tried again, and sank back in his chair with a little groan. He had become incredibly weak.

"Wait!" she said, with just the slightest abatement of her coldness. "I help you." She stooped, bent her bare left arm round his waist, gripped hard, and lifted. She was amazingly strong. "Walk," she said, and he shuffled on, feebly, almost lifted off the ground.

"But you are wet," she suddenly said: the wet back of his tunic must have felt cold to her fore-arm.

"I fell into the water," he said humbly.

"Go slowly," she said, a little more gently. "I support you." She took up the lamp in her unemployed hand and they moved slowly along a low tunnel-like passage towards the back of the house. At its end she pushed a door open with her foot. The lamplight showed a damp-walled room, some ten feet square, nearly half filled with a damp, sodden-looking bed, its surface much sunken in the middle. But it was a bed.

She lowered him till he could sit on its edge. Then she stood and surveyed him once more. "You are a soldier by trade?" she asked.

"No, Madame," he said. "An amateur only."

"A volunteer?"

"Yes."

"Were you so poor?"

He shrugged feebly. "That depends," he said.

But she was a ferocious realist. "Had you got," she

said in a voice that was like a stamp of impatience at such affectations, "enough money to keep you alive?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"And yet you volunteered?"

"Yes."

"My God!" she said. "What an imbecility!" No blast of contempt quite so direct had ever scorched Victor. She lit him a candle and went out erect, lamp in hand, like a painted figure of one of the Fates. "Put your clothes outside the door," she ordered, before disappearing. "They must be dried. Remember it."

He took off his puttees and boots by prolonged efforts, fumbled and slid more easily out of tunic, socks, Cardigan jacket and slacks, laid them all outside the door, and slipped into bed in his two undergarments; the heat of the fire had nearly dried them in front. If only the bedclothes were thick! And they were; he glowed already. A dreamful exaltation possessed him. Why had there never been lyrics about beds as well as roses and wine? Oh, the dull fools that we had been in our old years of ease, to take as mere matters of course these exquisite heirlooms handed down to us by the sane, brooding ingenuity of all the generations—we that gushed over the little contraptions of beavers and wrens! Or did some people have this power already—of seeing old and plain things in all the beauty and wonderfulness that they had had when they were new? Had poor old Bron got a touch of it—Bron, who had such comical ways of putting forth his elementary mind upon the most commonplace things with a perpetually renewed delight and affection and even a kind of ingenuous surprise?

So, for a few minutes, Victor's brain worked excitedly, till he fell into some sort of sleep and awoke an hour afterwards, furiously hot and yet with a shiver on him and longing for more heat, nothing but heat. He put his head under

the clothes and tucked them in tightly round it; he felt exultantly cunning, like one shrewdly shutting out enemies. All life had contracted into a passionate sense of that glowing cavity where he lay curled up in the dark, with all the world's evils outside.

He slept again and awoke wondering where he could be. He got out of bed, to make sure, felt his knees failing him absurdly, and tottered back to the bed and sat on its edge, to think. But almost at once he was horribly cold, so he got into bed again and lay shuddering, with his head under the clothes, using his hot breath to warm up the bed again. Heat—he must have heat. Perhaps he had ague or some sort of fever: heat was the thing for it.

Time after time he crossed and recrossed the vague frontier between feverish musing and feverish dream. At one of these half-awakings he had an impression that a square piece of greyness had opened itself in the dark; at another, that the grey of the square was growing darker; at another, that it was gone. The next time he awoke his skin was cool and his head clear: he felt strangely well, and looked round, quite alive now. The square was growing lighter again. Why, the thing was a window, blenching at dawn, and—Oh, good God! this was the second time it had done that—he had been here two nights, an absentee from duty, without leave. There was not a moment to waste. He jumped up.

III

He found his legs weak: you do not bake or sweat a touch of fatigue fever out of your body for thirty hours on end without paying some price for it. Still, he must act, or be lost. Moving slowly he got to the window and drew back the blind.

Frost had returned; a cold pallor lay over the dreary fields, and a kind of *rigor mortis* held the mud; a starved

robin, hopping hopelessly about outside, threw obliquely at Victor the lonely sparkle of its eye, in desperate petition. He was curiously moved by this other creature in trouble and deadly danger: he turned, to get the crumbs of ration biscuit in his tunic-pocket. His uniform was not there. Oh, of course, it would be at the door. He hastily opened the door. No, it was not there, but some other clothes were—a coat and trousers such as French farm-labourers wore. They looked enigmatic, lying there in the dark passage.

He turned to the window again. The robin was gone, in despair of bounty. Without that one spark of sentient flesh warmed with blood, the petrified landscape looked still more sinister than ever. He looked out at it shudderingly, as though at some pitiless beast.

While he stared, a knock came at the door. He got into bed, for decency's sake, and then shouted in French: "Madame, my uniform, please." The knock came again, louder. He called out, "Come in."

The statue-woman came in. She had the clothes on her arm that Victor had seen at the door. "You are better?" she asked, with all her original austerity. "You are able to dress yourself?"

"Yes, yes, Madame—a thousand thanks," Victor replied. "Only—my uniform. I rejoin my comrades."

"There has been," she said, "a misfortune."

"Yes, but my uniform," Victor importuned.

"Accidents happen," she said, like some one doggedly meeting an accusation.

"An accident?" Victor's voice had become sharp with fear.

"I left them to dry," she doggedly said. "The stove door was open. A red-hot coal must have fallen."

He half rose in bed. "My God! You don't mean——"

"Yes," she said. "All burnt—completely." He threw his head back on the pillow distractedly. "Cannot accidents happen?" she added, almost with animosity.

Victor groaned. He could see it in print: "The accused was found behind the lines two days later, wearing French civilian clothing." Terrified, hustled, bewildered, his mind felt about for a plan—any sort of plan. The woman was putting the mufti clothes down on the bed, over his feet. Of only one thing was he sure—that he would never put on that loathsome and deadly disguise; the thought of walking up, in the livery of desertion, to any British soldier at ease in his honourable garb—that was too frightful. "Pardon, Madame," he said at last. "I am in danger. I beg your help—an addition to all your infinite goodness to me. I must write to my officer, now, at once. Could you, in your great kindness, get my letter delivered?"

She broke out in scornful derision. Delivered! She, alone on the farm, get a letter delivered! Delivered where?

He explained. In the trenches. Not four kilometres away. To an officer there—or a man—any soldier would take it and know what to do.

She hooted at the idea. "Yes, and be shot for a spy, like old Pierre Lafitte that tried to sell eggs to the English. Shot! Like a Prussian!"

As soon as the torrent lulled for a moment, Victor said, "Then I must go, Madame, instantly, as I am."

She changed suddenly. "Give me the letter," she said, "I will deliver it."

"How good you are!" he said fervently.

She rummaged out pen, ink and paper. He wrote down the whole of his mischance with intense veracity, nerving himself to refrain from making his case a shade more specious than the truth. He would trust English justice. Captain Black was a man of honour and kindness; Black would

believe him; Black would see him through. He addressed the letter to Black.

When the woman came to take it she put some food near him and said, "Stay you there, quietly." She picked up the trousers and coat she had left on the bed. "They only smother your feet," she said, and she took them away.

IV

Except the everlasting mumble of guns, the only sounds that reached Victor, through all the few hours of light on that day, were the continuous wail of some imprisoned calf, the quarrelsome squeals of a starving litter of pigs and, now and then, the terrified or angry squeaking of the lean household's mice. Dusk was already thick when the woman re-entered his room.

She looked moroser than ever. Her face darkened at anything like a question from Victor. The letter? Delivered? Why, what else? For what had she gone out but that, on this dog of a day? What God could have made such a day?

"Le bon dieu Boche, Madame, sans doute." Victor tried to be nice to her. Was it the Captain himself, he ventured to ask, who had taken the letter into his hand?

"Naturally," she said, in a defensive way. "Did you not write the address?" She put down his evening food and went out abruptly. All the rest of the evening the only signs he got of her being alive in the place were little noises of house-work and, once, tumultuous sounds of joy from the little pigs and a short pause in the lament of the calf. She must have been feeding the beasts in the dark.

The next day was, to Victor's consternation, dead blank. No escort came to clothe him and take him away, prisoner or free. Just when his third dawn in the place began to grow grisly he was awaked by a distant sound of machine-

gun firing—first, little pouting flings of it, then long runs of its woodpecker taps, many guns tapping together, their dotted lines of sound overlapping each other. The flurry died down in an hour and then another day of torment dragged itself almost soundlessly through. Each day was worse than the last; he was growing strong with the rest and the food; he had lost the battered body's forlorn consolation of falling back on its most elementary self in an absorbed passion of abandonment to warmth and rest after exposure and toil.

Every time the woman brought him food he "fished" as much as he dared. How had the Captain looked, on receiving the letter? Had he opened it instantly? Had he asked any questions? Or had some one else taken the letter, to give to the Captain? No good. At any new question the woman seemed to throw herself upon guard: she froze fast, and Victor, anxious to bring on a thaw, would try to cover up his offence with solicitous courtesies. Had she no fear, he asked, of living there, with shells falling so near?

"I am not in the habit," she said, "of changing house." And then, as if in rage at his unreason, "I have only this farm. Can I take it away? The land and the beasts and the buildings?"

He winced. "Your husband, Madame—?" he began at another of these conversational crises.

"Killed," she said, with no trace of conventional sorrow.

"Ah!" he said, with his fine civilised note of delicate sympathy.

"Bah!" She blew the sentimental stuff away like fluff. "He was an idiot. Not a maniac. Imbecile only—since a year before the war. A year after our marriage."

"And yet he fought, Madame?"

"No. He was exempt because he was an idiot. I have his exemption papers here in the house."

She looked at Victor hard—he couldn't tell why. God

alone knew why she did everything she did—so he thought. "And yet he fell, Madame?" he murmured sympathetically, in spite of discouragements.

"He was minding the beasts," she said, "over there." She waved an Amazonian arm towards the south. "I had sent him. A big shell buried him alive. It chanced I was looking; at one moment I saw him, and the next moment he was up a little way in the air, feet first; he was a black thing among white smoke. When I arrived, there was only the hole and the mound of earth round it. I knew that he must be somewhere under the earth. Happily he had no money on him. I always made him leave his coat in the house, with his money in it and his certificate of imbecility —all his papers. Nobody knows, except I, that he is dead."

Victor might have shuddered had his manners been less good. He imagined that husband. Poor devil! A half-witted serf on the farm of the wife whose magnificent womanhood he had disappointed. Magnificent it was; no denying it. Untender and pitiless as this childless woman might be, yet she was super-feminine, too; a very statue of sex, heroic size; deep-bosomed, puissant-loined, with the full eyes and lips of unspilt youth and of sensuous vehemence. She might have been the foundress of some strapping race of soldiers, settlers and plough-driving, horse-quelling women fit to be their mates.

"And you, who ask questions," she said. "Are you married?"

"No."

She said "Ah!" in a way that might have meant any one of three or four things: at least, so it seemed then to her super-civilised hearer. To him, with his expectations of delicate indirectness in human speech, she was a sphinx just because she had no secret about her at all; she was like a

horse or a dog whose enigmatic-looking eyes, with nothing but elementary desires and fears behind them, will set you riddles of your own making, if riddles are in your line.

V

When a fourth day—nine hours of mere misty pallor—was running out and the woman brought Victor's supper, she said, "Your battalion is gone." She said it brusquely, almost spitefully, as children say, "So there!"

Victor sat up with a gasp. "Gone! Where?"

"God knows. They were attacked by the Prussians."

"Yesterday morning?" Victor remembered that gunning at dawn.

"You seem to know more than I," she said, and shut her mouth tight.

He importuned: "Tell me, Madame, for the love of God!"

She made him entreat a little, and then relented a little. "I hear they drove the enemy back. They lost many men. So they were relieved."

He wrung his hands without knowing that he did it. He felt, once more, that the curse had never fallen on him till now. Comrades had given their proofs while he had lain here. "Go, hang yourself, brave Crillon. We fought at Arques, and you were not there"—he thought of the blistering words that greeted the laggard in war. "You are sure," he asked, "that my letter was rightly delivered?"

"No!" She looked him full in the face, as if she disdained further lying. "*A bas les masques!*" she seemed to say, like a Clytemnestra turning on her old fool of a husband. "I burnt it," she said.

He said, "You have killed me, Madame," and then did not speak or move for a little while. But his mind was silently moving about within the cage that now held him

fast: it felt at the bars here and there. "And my uniform?" he presently asked, in a dead voice.

"I burnt it," she said.

"On purpose?"

"Yes."

"You have put me to death," he repeated.

She had begun to walk up and down the tiny floor-space of the room, turning its cramped squalor into something grotesque in contrast with her superb swinging gait. "You were half dead," she said, "and I gave you back life. I give it you now."

"Life!" he muttered, bitterly.

"Yes. Can't you see? For you to be safe, after this, you must be a new person, get a new name, have a new life. And I, alone, have a new life to give, a life free and safe. See! Here are my husband's papers—his civil state, his exemption from service—everything. Stay here and I offer it all to you. They will think you were killed with the rest—blown into little pieces or buried."

She had ceased to stride about and had taken some soiled pieces of paper out of her clothes and held them out to him. Her eyes had seemed to grow larger and darker while she talked, and her face was flushed, and her breathing quick and eager. She was shaken, and, even in his distress, Victor saw now in her face something akin to many looks that had fallen on him from women at home.

At home he had taken lightly enough the incidence of such looks, as kings take the fervour of crowds that cheer from the mud while the royal procession passes. In his world any coming-on humour in women was, at the gravest, matter for wistful comedy. The Violas and Marianas that silkily coquetted men into consent, or failed and charmingly faded away in picturesquely moated granges, were ornaments, not volcanoes. The magnificent animal stooping over him

now, with her heaving chest and clutching eyes, had no more to do with that graceful world of ineffectual damask cheeks and faint beatings of frail wings than his own squalid soldier life had had to do with the pride and pomp of war. There was a kind of she-spider, some one had told him once, that made such use of the male as her sex needed, and then killed off that weaker vessel, as worth keeping no longer. She looked like some such frightful realist of sex as that—untender, uncompassionate, seeking her own long-thwarted satisfaction with the singleness of purpose of water dammed up in an Alpine valley till it smashes through. She used her beauty with callous directness, shedding its coarse intoxicant power about him now as if she were Nature herself in some mood of heartlessness towards the creatures whom she drugs or hustles into the service of her queer purposes. Bewildered and failing, he murmured again, "You have killed me, Madame—and shamed me."

"Shamed!" she exclaimed. "And what of me? Can't you hear people, after the war—'The woman that kept the young Englishman for herself?' Didn't I try? Did I make up to you when you came? It was you, with your handsome face and soft voice and gentleman's ways, lying there looking at me—it was you that forced me to give myself to you."

He had no armour. He was enmeshed, body and mind, beyond extrication. "There, there," she said, soothing him with the shallow sympathy of nurses whose thoughts are on ends of their own. "As the little children say, let us 'kiss and be friends.'" She bent down quickly and kissed him, not by any means with the kiss of a child.

BOOK SEVEN

CHAPTER XXI

I

YOU would soon shut this book, with a groan, if it tried to drag you along the whole of the road the Comfies travelled from the day when Victor was gazetted as "Missing; believed killed" to the day when Auberon was parted, a year later, from all that were then left of Number One Section.

Ponies that work in mines may have some faint recollection of having lived long ago in meadows full of warm sunshine. Most of the men in the section seemed to have some such sense of a good old world that had come to an end. The wheel that they were tied to rolled monotonously round, lugging them interminably through the same cycle of squalid labour and bedraggled rest, varied with a few bouts of slaughter that gained nothing of any visible value. They lost the White Hope and Bert on the bald Thiepval slopes, Fulford and Turmits in Delville Wood and Smythe in a raid among the swamps of the Scarpe. Little Mellett was killed in the first ten seconds the first time the Company had to attack.

They gained the name of good troops. An Army Commander, far off in a pleasant château embosomed in trees, would put his pencil on a point on the map, the night before a battle, and say, "I've got a battalion of Comfies there. So that bit's safe." The G.O.C. of their division told a war-correspondent who called at his snug hut that the Comfies were all as jolly as mud-larks. "They'll all be heartbroken if this old war ever ends." The Comfies read the words in one of Roads' papers and passed it grimly from hand to hand, cursing all liars.

All of them were always tired—even McGurk; even

Auberon; but their will to endure held on as old boots will hold together long after they ought, on any sober calculation, to come to pieces. Slowly and unwillingly they had come to believe that the High Command bungled its job, except that the grub always came up all right. The men talked less than before; each had more to hush up; Auberon could not believe, at the time, that great fellows like Cart, Booker, McGurk and Ruthven were sometimes feeling themselves as nearly quelled as he was by brute cold or exhaustion; so he kept his mouth shut on his shame. But they were all like that—all beaten, as separate men; each of them subsisting only on the same passionate, groundless faith in the greater fortitude of the others and clinging doggedly to his place in such a brotherhood of his betters.

II

It was late in 1916 when Auberon was severed from these honoured friends. The ineffectual battle of the Somme was then petering out in a few last spurts of futile bloodshed in the wet twilight of late autumn mornings. But nothing worth calling a fight was going on at the time; Auberon, a sergeant now, was a mile from the front, in command of a burying party; some of the dead of both sides had lain out too long and were stinking.

An enemy shell burst at what seemed a safe distance, as things counted then; but one knife-edged flake of the broken shell-case flew fast and low and performed a feat like that of a headsman who makes a clean job of it. Auberon felt the whizzing thing graze his left hip, and when he looked down he saw a hand lying on the ground, with its raw end like a sheep's severed neck at a butcher's door. Things strike you queerly; Auberon gave a foolish little laugh when he saw that the palm he had washed that morning was now that futile thing, so absurdly thrown

out of its working relations with him and everything else.

But severed arteries do not give much time for thought. McGurk flung himself on Auberon with vague impulses of violent tenderness; Auberon had to show the blundering and crying fellow how the tourniquet business was done and the leaping jet of blood reduced to a dribble; and then to give the needful orders to Corporal Ruthven in case he, Auberon, should not be able to carry on with the command. By the time these precautions were taken a sort of invasion of darkness and unsureness was besetting him. "Must see Molly about this," he sagaciously thought to himself, and then toppled backwards into the waiting arms of McGurk.

"A proper Blighty one," Booker pronounced, with frank, friendly envy, "as ever I see."

"He's a good man," Ruthven said. "He desairves it. Fall out, McGurk and Booker, an' carry Sergeant Garth to One Tree dressing-station. The remainder, carry on buryin'."

Disablement brought Auberon a renewal of the amazing revelation that people have been thinking of you even more indulgently than they have let on. He awoke on a stretcher to find Captain Black saying good-bye to him with extraordinarily shining eyes and thanking him for "all he had done." One man after another, from the platoon, managed to turn up incredibly, out of nowhere, to give him a hail as he was borne off to the ambulance. Borne! What rot it was! He could have walked. But he gave in; he knew he had passed into the keeping of that most absolute of powers, the R.A.M.C., wherein the civil doctor's control over his patient and the colonel's control over his men are combined into a very quintessence and distillation of sovereign authority.

III

It was bad when the time came to hand in his kit and receive his discharge from the Army with a good character, all his back pay and seventeen shillings and sixpence to buy him some civilian clothes. It felt like real loss of caste to give up his three greenish-brown stripes and his bomber's badge of red wool. "Would I were with them, whether in Heaven or Hell," he felt when he thought of Cart and the rest, like the man in the little blue *Henry V.* that he had now read dozens of times. Wherever they were was the centre of life; it was mid-stream; all other places were backwaters, places for lazy lilies and toy boats.

Of course there was home to see, when he came out of hospital. Often, when things had been going badly in France, he had regaled himself with visions of the kindly-faced house flushed to a heart-warming red in the level light of summer evenings, or wading in mist, up to its knees, in the primeval stillness of late winter afternoons of the grave and dim kind. And yet the real thing was, somehow, imperfect. He came to think now that the visions he had had in France must have been—although he had not known it—of the house with Molly about it, with Victor at any time likely to come, with Bert at work in the garden, and Fulford always possible too. If he had only known, long ago, what a good thing he had got! He felt now like a man with a toothache who thinks, "Oh, those old times when I had no toothache! How little I knew of the immensity of my beatitude then." Molly nursing in some unknown place in France, Victor dead, Bert dead, Fulford dead, almost at the expiry of his self-imposed probation; only his father remained, and it was only at meals that his father was not absorbed in some urgent war-work or other.

A few people came to the house; Colin among them.

He was at home on leave from G.H.Q. in France every three months; he was adorned now with the ribbons of many medals and orders. He told jubilant tales of a farcical competition for such guerdons of valour between himself and Claude—" the two most bigoted non-combatants," he said, " on the whole General Staff."

Mrs. Barbason looked in one day with a wise young nephew of hers, who seemed to be consciously bearing on his own shoulders the brunt of the war, as a clerk in the Foreign Office. " You would hardly suppose," he said to Auberon instructively, " the amount of wear-and-tear that there is for your nerves when at any hour of the day or night you may be literally bombarded." Even Mrs. Barbason, no severe critic of any relations of her own, was critical of this youth. " It *is* rather sickening," she said, " to have Leslie bleating with funk in a cellar in London while Claude is sticking it at the front."

George Roads, now Sir George, had to be entertained for a couple of days, for some alleged public purpose, and Garth's modest household was hard put to it to take in the war baronet's retinue. He brought two Rolls-Royce cars and two chauffeurs, a body-servant, a golf professional, a short-hand clerk and a masseur—all young, strapping men in high condition. His papers were crying aloud, at the time, for " firmer " dealings with Quakers and other refrainers from the fight. But the baronet's darling hobby was " German atrocities." All his papers offered a full supply of these daily—crucifixions of captured British soldiers, preferential bombings of British hospitals, cannibalism by Germans in the field and so on. He burned to reciprocate these visionary crimes. " If Ministers," he said, " had any manhood, we'd soon teach these beasts. We ought to bomb Cologne, night after night—smash the whole town."

" Spend bombs on civilians," Garth mildly asked, " when

they might be used to cut enemy railway lines to his front? "

Roads glared. " I thought," he said, " your own adopted daughter was bombed by these brutes at Étaples."

" Her hospital was hit. Some English and German wounded were killed. If the airman who did it had aimed a shade better he'd have hit the big reinforcement camp next door and killed a hundred A1 men."

" You imagine they don't aim at the Red Cross on purpose? " Roads indignantly asked.

" I fancy they're too keen on winning the war to waste ammunition like that."

Roads was bewildered and flustered. He could not comprehend these Garths who would work and fight and starve for England and yet never seemed to see war as it was—as a fight between a side that could never play fair and a side that could never hit foul. When Roads said that we ought to put our biggest munition works out in the open in Essex and Suffolk, make shells on the lower floors and keep the top floors full of German prisoners—" regular screen of 'em. What do *you* think? " Thomas Garth replied, like a man quietly thinking it out, " Or we might move our prisoners to Cornwall."

Roads glared again. " And if the Huns starve their prisoners? "

" We might give ours double rations."

Roads' mouth fell open. " Why, good God! " he said, " that's the old t'other cheek wheeze! "

" Don't you think," Garth said, " that we may be all taking it too much for granted that Christ just talked through his hat? "

IV

During these conversations the eyes of Thomas and Alberon Garth would often meet silently—not with any overt expression of contempt for the degenerate before them,

but with the new, completely understanding intimacy that had begun in the last hours before the war. "Don't judge England by this. We shall win yet"—that was what Auberon read, plain as print, in his father's face. His father hardly ever mentioned Roads when they were alone, though he spoke of the way that many other people at home took the war; how, for example, the Governing Body of Chellingham had ordained that, as growing boys, the school were not to be subject to the prevailing restriction of food by "voluntary rationing," and how the boys had risen in revolt and demanded the more meagre diet, and got it. Also he told his son how Fulford, an heirless man, had left Molly by his will the New Hall and everything else that he had "as a token of respect and gratitude to her and her family," and how Molly had just given the house to be a permanent home for soldiers incurably disabled. When the last of Roads' train of cars was out of sight, all that Garth said was, 'He may be slyly harbouring some aged German governess somewhere." Auberon thought it quite possible. People always seemed to put their worst foot forward; they wore on their sleeves a heart far less good than their own. Unless you were pretty slow, as his father was, to give any one up as mere vermin, you might come a cropper.

Colin's feeling towards the great vendor of rubbish in print was, obviously, not one of mere toleration. He delighted in the idea of such an invincible rogue. "He's Godlike," said Colin, "Britain's extremity's his opportunity. He prosecutes his conquest of England all the harder while poor old England tries to conquer Germany. War hath her victories for him, no less renowned than peace's. He fills his rags with yarns about the German ladies'-maids in England with bombs in their vanity bags—cheapest 'copy' he can buy—and then pesters the Cabinet to buy the paper by millions as 'propaganda' to scatter all over the world for

the good of the cause. They'd better do it, too, or Roads will turn on all his prints to say their wives have German kitchen-maids or their stepfathers' first wives were Hungarians. You've heard his latest masterpiece of strategy—no? At least you know how the country's swarming with war profiteers—the thing's fabulous—it's redistributing all the money in England. Well, Roads has got his Cabinet friends to put a whopping tax on all these wild war profits. See how it works? It brings the robbers up against a painful choice. Either three-fifths of their swag will have to go back into the nation's pocket again—dreadful idea!—or else —now do you see? "

"No."

"Or else they must spend it on advertising themselves in the papers of Roads and his brethren. For then, you see, it won't be taxed—it's business expenses and so it's deducted from the profits of the original ramp. You see the line of thought—'my country would waste the money on shells: why not use it to advertise my own business?'"

"Well, I'm blowed!" said Auberon, amazed at the simplicity of this remunerative train of cause and effect.

"I hear the newspaper advertisement boom is tremendous," said Colin—"biggest ever known. So Roads is dormy—can't lose so long as there's war. We'll all be ruined, but he'll have an extra milch-cow. All in the odour of sanctity, too. He comes across to visit G.H.Q. and the C.-in-C. doesn't kick him. He has the patriot Roads to tea and sends him about in a closed car, with a person of pleasing exterior like me to show him the back of the front. He nearly jumped through the roof when the car skidded an inch. He thought the Germans were on him. I may tell you I made a charming impression. I kept the car facing away from the front, steadily. He said I was the right man in the right place, and if any damned fools in the Army

tried to do me out of my job I must just let him know and he'd see me through."

Auberon liked Colin. Whatever Tommy-rot Colin might talk, he was fun; he was the only person still alive who had even a little of Victor's power of dazzling and bewildering you pleasantly with enigmatic chaff. When Auberon found that life at home was rather too much like the life of a boy outside a big round tent, with a circus in full blast within, and begged the War Office to give him such work in the field as a one-armed buffer need not make a mess of, he was glad to find that his commission " for special employment " was likely to bring him to places where Colin might be seen, and Claude too, and possibly the old battalion, possibly even Molly herself at her hospital outside Étaples, which some madman in high place had wedged in, as Auberon's father had said, between the main railway line from the sea to our front and the great reinforcement training camp on the piney sandhills above, as if to collect as many as possible of the enemy bombs that missed these standard targets.

V

Now that he was an officer, Auberon's job was to know by heart every bit of the British front line and of the roads in its rear and to be ready at any moment to pilot some distinguished guest of our Army to any point he might wish to see. The guests were of all sorts—Allied or neutral military attachés, British and foreign statesmen, generals, famous writers, world-shaking journalists, captains of industry and leaders of labour. Auberon learned to study his men, each after his kind, as God had created them. He kept in hand a kind of working stock of war-like peep-shows and tit-bits of sensation, to suit different tastes. Some of the visitors, he knew, would enjoy the place at Blangy, east of Arras, where the two front lines came within a

dozen yards of each other, so that the air there was always heavy with silence and holding of breath. Others were sure to take delight in the piquant traverse of the Grande Place at Ypres, where a German gunner on the heights east of the town would sometimes try to snipe your car as it scurried across the bumpy open square to plunge, like a rabbit, into the cover of the ruinous houses beyond. For some the underground world of our electrically lighted catacombs in the Loos salient would be a safe draw; for others the wide prospect over the enemy lines from the sly observation-post high up in the monastery ruins on Mont St. Eloi, or from the peep-hole tunnel bored through Kemmel Hill, or from one of the shattered houses east of Maroc. And, above all, Auberon kept many mental notes of points where a car and its driver could be left safely on the west, or leeward, side of a tall heap of ruins while Auberon walked his charges up the remaining couple of miles to the front trench.

All these dissimilar sightseers interested Auberon vastly. He found that Army Commanders and eminent trade-union officials were often curiously alike—in their convivial jollity, their taste in funny stories, their habit of trenchancy, their unbookishness and their knack of getting on with all sorts of men; they took to each other at once. A famous writer, often abused as being no patriot, but a cur, was the only one, of all the people he took to Ypres, who begged to be let drive the car across the square by himself—" It's rotten," he said, " that serving soldiers like you and the chauffeur should run any risk in taking joy-riders about." The only guest who gave him trouble was a celebrated martial orator who brought a photographer to photograph him posed on the summit of the newly captured Vimy Ridge. " How could I die better? " this worthy said when Auberon vetoed the proceeding as likely to draw enemy fire. Auberon did not explain that his own chief concern was not lest the

eloquent person should die, but lest fire be drawn on a working-party of English soldiers who were shovelling earth close by. But he reflected silently and sagaciously: Oh, he was coming to know quite a lot about human nature.

In the practice of his new vocation he watched, from carefully chosen points of high ground, or from the tops of surviving trees, all the chief operations in the battles of Arras, Messines, Flanders and Cambrai. He never ceased to thrill at the eastward rush of his car in the early morning darkness before these fights, through the sleeping towns of Flanders or Artois, along the avenues of waving poplars, towards the fitful radiance that jumped and winked over the front, a fan-shaped effusion of light swelling up from the ground for an instant and then subsiding as quickly and leaping out somewhere else, as though a great invisible lamp were being swung about behind the globe of the earth and coming up nearly to the horizon at the end of each swing, but never quite raising the actual flame above it.

Before each attack he would take pains to find out whether the Comfies were to be in it. If they were, he would coax the guest of the day up to some place where news, at any rate, could be had of their fortunes. Thus he watched from afar the dwindling of his friends. Captain Black went at Messines, tortured to death by a wound in the groin after leading the Company in three attacks without a scratch; but Cart, Booker, McGurk and Ruthven lived on, taking a wound now and then, but always finding their way back to the battalion. Auberon had the luck to catch sight of a shock of flaming red hair and two great cheek-bones, like knees, as he entered a ward of the Hospital of St. John at Étaples, to which he had conducted a great American surgeon on an off-day. There was no mistaking McGurk.

The Gael was apologetic about his injuries. "If ye'll believe me," he pleaded, "it couldn't be helped. We're not

at all the deminted bein's that ye'll remimber we were, the time we came out, tryin' hard to be kilt for nothin' at all, like hairoes in theayters—off'cers no better than min, an' Captain Black apt to gab in his sleep to the day of his dith, so his batman informs me, about the desthruction he'd done on The Beak and Capel—the wan that we called Caruso the Song—an' all Number Two Section, the very first day we wint into the line, be not condiscindin' to march be sictions on roads under innimy observation, an' he the best off'cer ever came next or nigh us and not the like of the Staff an' commands that'd beat all at off'rin' Christian souls their bist chance of gratu'tous extinction an' no comin' up of supports—an' th'innimy always at it, assistin' the fool work, be tryin' every expayjent not to be kilt but to win the war only."

VI

That was a great day, for it brought, besides, an even more wondrous reunion. In the late afternoon Auberon left his American friend to enjoy half an hour's shop talk with an English brother-master of the craft. Auberon wanted to walk about the brown and white town of hut and tent hospitals, on the off chance that Molly, too, might be off duty and taking a walk; and, as if his wishing were an efficacious form of prayer, he had scarcely walked as far as the twist in the Camiers road, where it makes a sudden right turn, to pass under the railway that runs beside it, when he met Molly in her outdoor clothes. They were only two yards apart when they came into each other's sight and said: "You, Bron!" and "Hullo, Molly!" with the grotesque inadequacy of their kind when tremendous occasions arise.

She turned back, away from the hospital and towards the little fishing town. As he walked beside her you might have thought they had nothing to say. Presently she

touched his sleeve that had no wrist inside, and said, "Your poor hand!" Then she examined his face with sidelong looks, joyous and anxious at the same time. "You're thin, too," she said almost accusingly, as mothers do.

He had to force the brusquely jovial note. "Well," he said, "d'you wake all the patients to wash 'em, at five in the morning, as they did me?"

She laughed a little. "You know why, of course? The night nurses want to have everything ready to nip off duty at eight. It *is* rather stony. I'll jump on it when I'm a Matron."

They had renewed by now their old way of making common or joint movements by tacit consent, a kind of unison of impulse. So they halted, without a word said, on the quaint bridge over the trivial estuary of the Canche. They had got to say real things now, if ever; their time was short—he knew it, and knew that she knew it; yet, for a few minutes more they both looked down at the dirty salt-water ebb eddying at the tail of a pier. Then she asked, with an amazing clear firmness: "Where was he killed? May you say?"

"At Ranvert l'Étang, seven miles east of Breteuil. On the high-road to Lille. There are three big elms—only stumps, of course, now—on the right of the road."

"I'll put that down," she said quickly. She took out a pencil and wrote on the back of an old letter.

He stared. "You don't mean to say——?" he began.

"There's a bare chance," she said, "that I might see it. There's a new plan now of 'flying teams'—a surgeon, a chloroform man and a nurse. They're sent wherever anything extra is doing, up the line—it may be anywhere."

They gazed down again for a while at the ragged weeds under water, stringing out wavily from their roots in the old wooden piles of the bridge. She suddenly said, with

that strange hard clearness again: "Is it certain he's dead?"

"Nothing was found but his cap and his rifle. But—Molly, don't hope." He grabbed her hand, it seemed so brutal to stamp the life out of vain hopes without anything to show that he meant kindly. "Nothing *is* found—quite often. You see—a lot of them were killed together. And then other shells come. Bodies get buried, by accident."

Her hand lay coldly in his. "Oh yes, I know," she said, wearily, as if it were something she had turned over and over, a thousand times. "But isn't there, say, one chance to ten thousand?"

"Less. I'm sorry, Molly. It's less."

She seemed to be carrying on a sort of cold argument in her mind—audibly. "Aren't there records of people found, after wars, who had seemed to be killed? They had delirium or they were paralysed by their wounds, or what we call shell-shocked, and then they were picked up by country people who kept them alive but did not know what to do about sending them home, so that they sank into some wretched life where they were."

Auberon's reason rejected such visions. "War," he said, "is too methodical now. The whole country's policed. Every one living is down on some list. You couldn't get lost—any more than you could on the pitch, with the 'Varsity cricket-match on."

"I know," she said. "Only—do you see, Bron!—it has to be *proved*." She looked at him intensely and entreatingly, as though in appeal to some understanding that he ought to have of what was moving her. Then her eyes flinched away, as it were, from his face—he couldn't tell why, and she stared down doggedly again at the water-weeds moored to the piles and streaming seaward just as the long hair of drowned women might stream.

Auberon looked down at them too, and saw that the streamers were now becoming less taut and more dishevelled "Low water!" he said, and looked at his watch. "Five o'clock! I must bolt to my man."

They walked back, through the squat village that smelt of fish, tarry cordage and brine, to the great hospital camp with its smell of antiseptics and soap. Half-way she said, as though it had come in the middle of some conversation, "How easy it is to make great mistakes—the ones that last you for years—perhaps all your life."

"It *is* all pretty difficult, ain't it?" he said. It was true. It was what he had to feel very often; but why should Molly feel it—she that had always had the knack of rightness in everything she did?

There was a silence and then she said, "Do you like your work?"

"Like it? My work is to do every Jack thing there is, except the one thing that has got to be done if we're ever to win this old war."

She gave his upper arm a sympathetic grip with her strong hand and then quickly let go. "I'm sorry, Bron. I have the luck. Mine's a good job. The next thing is always there, ready to do—and no time to lie about, crying on graves, or being a fool or regretting some old foolishness."

"One does get a sort of peace out of it, don't you?" he said, with the unflecked serenity of his old soldiering days recalling themselves to his mind.

"I fancy," she said, "that the way to be happy is to sign on as a slave, by your own choice, and then just stick it out. You keep some sort of rag of pride flying, that way, and you're free from all the old bother of running round wondering what you're to do to be saved or to have a good time. You only go on and on, like some tiny star, as a part of whatever it is that keeps everything going, and trust it's

worth while. That's faith, I suppose. 'In His will is our peace,' and all that."

"I guess that's right," he said. "I seem to get it clearer since I chucked training for a parson. The way men like McGurk and Booker and Cart stick on to the line that, whatever goes wrong, whatever fool any one over them makes of himself, the one thing worth doing in life is to pull off this war—that's faith all right, or the nearest thing I've ever seen to it."

They passed under the dank railway arch as he spoke. Beyond it, a few hundred yards, her hospital lay. At its little garden-gate they parted, with not a word yet said out of all the consolatory utterances that Auberon had planned for their first meeting since Victor's death.

CHAPTER XXII

I

BY the evening of August 7, 1918, Auberon's mess at the old Château of Vaurignies had for a whole week been enlivened by Colin's presence. Colin amused himself in the War Office now; it was the only place, he declared, where gallantry could get its full reward in these times; certainly many ribbons of foreign orders of chivalry had lately added themselves to the beauty of the bosom of his tunic. Just for a fortnight he had quitted this rich harvest-field and come out to France on some "special duty" or other—perhaps to work up a case of some sort, for some political worthy at home to use against somebody else. "Some filthy wangle, no doubt," Claude Barbason said in his own mess, which was ensconced in the quaint moated Château of Mouchy-le-Bois, ten miles off across the downs.

Every one's wits were lively to-night. The great battle was coming at dawn: every one knew; every one had his elating or awesome vision of to-morrow's fatefulness; to one it was fraught with hope of his own release from the long shame of being out of the fight; to another it brought a happy thrill of vicarious adventure, like owning a favourite for to-morrow's Derby. But Colin's elation overcrowed every one else's; the vivifying zest of his enjoyment acted like one of those super-bright mirrors which seem to put a curious overcharge of life into the things they reflect.

Colin had just gone, as the eyes and ears of somebody more august, to a grand pow-wow in Paris, about "Propaganda," the darling theme of many ignoble souls at the time —the hope, as Colin said, of winning the war by spitting, since shells couldn't do it. Colin described with ribald vivacity this conference of solemn mudlarks. The great

Roads had been there, to advise, as Britain's champion spitter of detraction at all ranges; Colin gloated over the sight of Roads set in the midst of a respectful ring of Allied statesmen and warriors, with his funny "firm" jaw and absurd set expression, like a cheap movie actor's. "A tyre," said Colin, "burst in the street, like a bomb, just when the still, strong man was bluffing his way through a whole harangue of clichés about not making war in kid gloves and so on—and then the still, the strong, turned whity-green and flung himself under the table. It was the frankest thing he ever did. I loved him for it."

Yes, Auberon reflected as he listened; Colin really did like any one, noble or scrubby, who lived with a will and gave his nature its full fling, for better or worse. And perhaps he was right. It was pleasant to think so. Through the open window of the mess, when Colin paused for a few moments, there came from the men's quarters, fifty yards off, the prettily tinkling tune of a popular song played on a concertina by some man at ease after his work; the last rays of sunlight for the day were throwing absurdly long shadows of trees all over the meadows. Everything was quiet and Auberon felt himself irrationally softened. His mind went back to the doomed battlefield of to-morrow. He had seen it to-day with a Scandinavian military attaché, to whom he was to show the fighting at daybreak. All the wide, sun-filled, figureless landscape east of our crowded line had lain sabbatically still through the hot afternoon, seeming almost to ache with a kind of taut vacuousness; soon would come the motionless night of the front, unbroken unless by the light plop and slow swishing soar of a few rocket lights, the sleepy grumble of some far-away gun and the low, clear sound of iron-tyred German wagons grinding along distant roads, like the midnight rumble of the market-gardeners' carts through good old peaceful Middlesex. Ten hours

more and some twenty thousand men who were now patiently cleaning rifles or munching dusty bread or spitting on dry hands would be led out and put to death, whatever good or harm they had done in their lives. At any rate they were not finding fault with each other's pasts now. And weren't they right? Like the sun's good humour, and Colin's, theirs shone on the just and the unjust alike, Thersites and Bayard.

Colin was rattling away again—poking fun at "all us shirkers in khaki"—and at himself most of all. "Of course I'm the *jeune premier des embusqués*—I'm juvenile lead in the whole farce of funk—I'm the Unconscientious-Objector-in-Chief"; but every one else in the cast, he allowed, was good in his part—the whole of the Staff, from Army Commanders up to John Immals :

> "Immals, with his surly hum!
> Delivering o'er to executors pale
> The lazy, yawning drone."

—thus did Colin turn the jet of his gay insolence on another guest of the mess, Captain Immals, the somewhat black-avised Assistant Provost-Marshal of the neighbouring Army Headquarters. Auberon scarcely heard the garbled quotation—Colin was always garbling quotations for fun. A kind of vesper rapture was filling Auberon's mind. Sunset and evening star, sunset and evening star—he thought the lovely words over to himself; and yet the serene air was astir, in a way; it had a kind of still quickness, as if the world were listening; it felt like that when a spring tide in the Thames came to its full height in the dark; the waters stood still, but they made an infinitesimal rustle as they felt about among dry grasses which common tides did not reach.

II

After dinner several men of the company slipped out to work; Colin, the Scandinavian attaché and one or two others went off to play billiards ; Auberon flitted in and out of the house, keeping an eye on the weather. Oh for a fine dawn to-morrow, with no rain or cloud, only just a thick early mist to veil Cart, McGurk, Ruthven and Booker while they walked up to the German machine-guns, and then a hot sun all day to warm their bodies and hearts. At one of his restless returns to the ante-room Auberon perceived that Captain Immals was finding his tongue. Immals was one of your slow starters in conversation; Colin compared him to a Stilton because you had to pour port into him to get him prime. The mess port was doing its kind office now, and a little ring of young officers unversed in carnage was drawing in round Immals. Auberon knew what that meant. Immals was talking the shop of his trade as a conductor of executions at dawn.

He was an ill-looking fellow; his face was well enough made, but foul in colour; it had the greenish pallor that some men show when thoroughly funked, and there were dark baggy pouches under his eyes; Immals' drinks always seemed to inflate these pouches and make him look more like a toad than he did earlier in the day. Besides, he had a grin to make you shiver: it came on very strong at some turns in his stock abattoir yarns. The mess called him Jack Ketch; but Colin, being more profoundly read in *belles lettres*, christened him "*Jean qui ricane*," to distinguish him from the weeping and the laughing hangman in the story. Auberon had thought it queer that so beastly a job should have found a man with a face to fit it so well; in books, this sage critic had begun to observe, people's looks suited their jobs, but not so often in life.

At the next of Auberon's fidgety re-entries the listening circle had drawn closer in; the listeners were staring at Immals in a stuck way, as though they loathed the sight of him and yet could not look anywhere else; they were like school-children who stop to see a pig killed. The next moment Colin came in from his usual win at billiards, saw what was on, and broke jauntily into the ending of one of Immals' old stories of shootings at dawn. How the devil, Colin asked, did Immals keep up a proper head of game for all these shoots of his? Were there deserters lying up, all over the country, in old badgers' earths, to be dug out when wanted?

Whisky-time, the sweet o' the night, had arrived. That was when Immals was always best in his part. At Colin's enquiry a beastly smile of superior knowledge came out on Immals' face. Colin, no doubt, had known that it would. Colin had known Immals long. And now he had touched a bell, as it were, at the door of the degenerate's brain and had got his ring answered. He went on; he drew Immals out; he was like a man casting a fly and watching to see the black snout of a dace shoot up at the fly from deep down in a pool. "Now, if I," Colin said, "with my mouthful of low, vulgar French, should have occasion to desert, I should use my talents for gallantry—gallantry in the more exquisite sense. I should make it my care to console the widow of some French rustic of substance, probably killed in the war. I should succeed to the goodman's pipe and slippers. I should fade imperceptibly into the life of the country. Ever get such a case, Immals? Or am I to make the first move?"

Immals' second whisky was now at his right hand and the pride of knowingness leered from his face. "That's the very stalest old dud," he pronounced impressively, "in the whole bag of tricks. 'Protective assimilation' we call it. What the grubs do, you know—get 'emselves up the colour

of leaves. In this Army alone we've shot four and a half brace of these gentlemen farmers."

"But how the hell d'you mark 'em to earth?" a wide-eyed subaltern gasped.

With a confidential gesture Immals drew the little circle closer about him. "Listen!" he said. He explained. Whenever an A.P.M. went about, he took care to make friends with a few natives of the right sort. He primed them. They were to keep their eyes open. If anything queer should be seen in their village, or round it—any new face at the pub, any strange labourer at a farm, any odd beggar hanging around whom nobody knew—they were to send word at once to a certain address. That would be money to them. "Thrifty people, the French," Immals said. "We don't miss much of the talk of the village."

"I see," said Colin demurely, "I'll have to live a bit out of the village." He paused for a second and then added, "And get myself listed as killed."

Immals winked as he tipped off the end of his drink. "Why, only yesterday morning, one of our friendlies brought in an old pair of pants with a regimental number still legible on 'em. It's the number of one of our men who was listed 'Missing; believed killed,' all but three years ago."

"That's nothing," Auberon hurriedly said. "Half the civilians in France are wearing our old army pants."

Immals snarled round at him. "Are they also wearing the army identification marks of the very man the pants belong to? 'Marks or scars—leaf-shaped mole at the back of the base of left little finger?' Eh? Are they shamming mad in a French war-widow's house, not half a mile from where the proper pants man disappeared?"

Auberon was silenced. But still he thought "These moles prove nothing. Why! Victor had a mole you might mistake for this poor devil's, whoever he is." The thought

absorbed him for a few seconds. Then he saw Colin eyeing him with a curious intentness and heard Immals say something not clear; about this hour each evening the voice of Immals used to thicken; still Auberon thought he had heard a place-name once familiar. "At Ranvert l'Étang did you say?" Auberon asked.

Immals spun round on his chair. "No. I didn't. Who the hell told you?"

Colin had grabbed the whisky-bottle up from its tray and he came to Immals' elbow and jogged it. "A drappie?" he said. "A drappie to put in your ee," and had half-filled the tumbler almost before Immals could turn to him.

"Oh, I used to know the old place," said Auberon lamely.

Immals took a goodly sup of the neat stuff, and a further instalment of his official reticence went the way of what had melted already. "Well," he said, "since you know such a lot, d'you know a mangy farm by an old quarry, north of Ranvert Crucifix?"

Auberon nodded.

"That's the bower o' bliss an' beauty," Immals leered.

"We lost some good men there," said Auberon.

"Lose any 'Missing; believed killed'?" Immals asked.

"Yes, Fritz blew 'em to mince on the road. We couldn't assort all the bits, to tell which was which. Some others were buried alive. We had to leave them." As Auberon recalled these things he saw Colin, bottle in hand, jog Immals' elbow again. "You're drinking nothing," Colin said, as he filled the whole tumbler. "Drink, man—drive away care."

Immals automatically raised the stuff to his lips and then grinned at Auberon. "One of 'em, Number 39507, Private V. F. J. Bevin, Devin, Devil, Nevil—that'sh man—Nevil?"

Slowly and coldly Auberon said, "No. No number near

it in the battalion." The words were literally true, and yet he was lying, after eighteen years of telling no lies. Victor's number, with only the 8 of the 89507 faded into a 3 on the old wool; Victor's initials; Victor's name just bedevilled a little by Immals' booze; the mole, the year; the very place. All the light, that had been slow to come, rushed in at once and he saw that Victor was alive as a rat is alive when the net is over its hole and the ferret ready. Auberon had always taken knocks as they came, without wailing or going away to lie down and think: so he was trained; shame and darkness had filled his world in one second; yet he could fall to, at once, on the only next thing to be done, the telling of any lie Victor might need, and keeping a wooden face for the world, like a battered boxer.

Immals was answering a question of Colin's. "No, we'll let him go on shovelling dung till we want him. Saves quarters and rations. B'shides, no special need of wholesome warnings just now in this Army. Fact, *moral's* rather good at the moment. Later on, we may have to ask a bit more of the men. A stoat or two may come in handy then, to nail up on the door."

A pink subaltern suddenly spluttered, "Let the poor devil off. He's dead already, for anything any one knows. Why not let him go on being dead?"

Immals turned on the boy like a dog that bares his teeth when you come near his bone. "Oho!" he snarled. "Desertion condoned if you sham dead as well!"

The pink boy collapsed into silent wretchedness. Immals glared round triumphantly. "Any more sentimentalists knocking about?" his look seemed to ask. "Hullo!" he said, his eyes falling on Auberon as they revolved. "Hadn't you better try some 'baccy 'shtead of that hot air?" Auberon had lit a match without filling his pipe and was sucking the

flame of the match through the stem. It burnt his mouth, but he kept his face wooden. Immals offered his pouch.

"Thanks," Auberon said. "I'll get mine. I've a craze for old twist." He had his pouch in his pocket; still—he must get out of that room, whatever the pretext. He got out. The knack of lying was coming back to him finely.

III

He made for the garden and flopped down on a stone bench. He wanted darkness—darkness is kind; it does not stare at you; it lets you alone, to count up your losses and think what to do.

There was nothing to do. He thought and thought, but nothing came. There was only one chance. Victory, sweeping and swift, was the only thing that might save Victor now. Let us but win, and happy Generals, with their titles and grants of money full in view, would be fairly hunting about for poor brutes to let off, whatever they might have done.

He examined the sky. Not a wisp of cloud in it; the air scarcely stirred; over park-land and meadow a fleecy sheet of ground mist had laid itself evenly out, a few inches thick. With the earth hot and damp, and the air cold above, that mist ought to thicken all night—the best thing possible for our attack. Yes, there was a bare chance for Victor.

There were not rooms for all in the house; so he had been sleeping, of late, on a camp-bed in a field a hundred yards from the garden front of the house, with no tent over him to turn the fresh and changeful friendliness of night into a stuffy sameness. The nights had been colder of late, and this premonition of autumn had been enhancing the joy of a little private rite with which Auberon had always celebrated the scrumptiousness of going to bed. With a

quick plunge of his head right under the blankets, as he got in, he had surrendered himself for some minutes to an enchanting illusion of entering into some other minute cubic space of warmth and ease, all aglow; the cabin of a tiny yacht moored out among drift ice on the Thames estuary, its little stove burning bright with frost, and the hanging lamp's flame burning steady and still; or a gypsy van with its shutters closed and its coal fire glorious within, far out on a December waste of white moor; or a wooden hut clinging fast to a mountain's iced shoulder, the pine logs ablaze on the fire and the soup hot in the pot when the last half-frozen climber gains the door and rests and thaws himself in Elysium and listens exultantly to the wail of the baffled storm and the creak of the hut's straining timbers.

To-night, without thinking what he was doing, he just omitted all that, and then wondered why. Perhaps that was what grief was. Twice or thrice since the smash he had thought, "Am I an insensible brute?"—he seemed so much the same man as before, so little visited by the lofty emotions that people bereaved or ruined or shamed in books seemed to feel; no fine tragic prostration of soul; only the dulling of a little private joy and the dying down of a freakish old impulse? For a second he wanted to talk to Molly about it; then he remembered—why, the rest of his life would have to be spent in remembering not to tell things to Molly.

He lay on his back, looking up at the dome overhead, which was pulsing now with the multitudinous quiver of full starlight. All these last years of shaken certainties he had liked that look of vibrant steadiness in clear night skies; whatever broke or was found to have rotted, down here, you could still see that a strong fixity and an undodgeable order were, at least, things that could be. But somewhere

under this shimmering ceiling, with its fresco painting of unalterable law, Victor was crawling about, unable to face it; Auberon saw him with rending vividness; Victor was lying, face down, on a dirty mattress and then he gave a start and went creeping to the farm door with a candle guttering over his shaking hand, to answer some fancied knock. Oh, damn the stars and their cold-blooded wheeling, paying out the hours till Victor died in torment, or that winged victory came.

He sat up to look round, and saw that the ground mist was deepening still. Yes, that was all right. As he looked, his eye was caught by movements inside the château. All along this northern front there ran, on each floor, a corridor with many windows. Several figures were passing along the corridor on the ground floor. Their shadows were thrown successively on the thin blind of each window, from the east wing, where the ante-room lay, to the west, where the main door was. The engine of a motor started; voices, now out of doors but dulled by the intervening house, became audible. Obviously the mess were seeing off the entertainer of the evening. "Goo' night, all!" came Immals' voice, very thick now; and the departing car got down to its work with a sigh of relief.

IV

The last lights went out in the house. Night was left to herself and she possessed her soul in quiet; even the everlasting reverberation of far-away guns became like a soft reverie about old, harsher sounds; filmy webs of dew tickled Auberon's face with moth-like caresses. Surely he could think quietly now—perhaps think of something to do. But thought came in no form but pictures of Molly hearing about Victor or pictures of Victor himself skulking through year after year of horrible days, like the beasts that live out

whole lives of panic, peering and sniffing—rats, badgers, wood-lice huddled under old boards.

Half an hour's vigil had passed when a shaft of sudden light fell on the back of his head from the direction of the château. He turned at once, but the light was already withdrawn. It was as if some one had looked to see if he was there. He scrutinised the château, but for a minute or two it was utterly dark. Then a thin, stabbing jet of bright light—clearly it was thrown by an electric flash-lamp—appeared at the east end of the corridor, upon the bedroom floor. Across the whole width of the house the fitfully brandished spear of light passed from window to window; somebody must have it in his hand to light his way to the stair-head at the west flank of the house. At the extreme western window of the upper floor the light sank low, but in a second or two it brightened again in the window below, which was that of the hall. There the light burned steadily for a moment; then it went out altogether and Auberon, in the extreme stillness of the night, heard the outer door of the château quietly closed.

The symptoms did not trouble him. Some insomniast, perhaps, or some one out for a look at the stars—and that would be no wonder either. So Auberon had returned for ten minutes or so to his own rueful thoughts when a symptom came that was quite of another order. This was the unmistakable sound of a car doing what no car should do at that hour—coming out of the stables which now were a British army garage; they stood a hundred yards away from the château, on its farther side. "One of the drivers," Auberon swiftly conjectured, "out after a woman and trusting all officers to be bats and see nothing." In two seconds more Auberon, clad in low gum boots and pyjamas, was speeding round the eastern wing of the château, to save the British army's petrol from unlawful use.

He was a fast mover. But so was somebody else. As Auberon turned the flank of the château he heard the key grind in the old stable-yard's grandiose gate. In another instant the lightless car that was standing in the drive outside the gate had started. Auberon put two fingers to his mouth and blew, with the *timbre* of a railway engine, the "Rally" blast that orders scattered men to double in towards the whistler.

No attention was paid. The car had already gathered pace enough to outrun the fastest goer on foot. It was scudding through the open gates of fair Renaissance ironwork that divided the château garden from the avenue outside. Just beyond the gates the drive crossed, by a level bridge, the little river Soubise; a water-mill stood a little to the left, up-stream, and the lasher below the dam boiled almost under the road. No other sound but the roar of the tumbling water could reach the ear of any one crossing the stream; so Auberon waited a second or two, to let the truant get the use of his hearing, and then he split the ear of night again with the same rasping signal of recall. No notice was taken. The sound of the hastening car diminished down the long avenue.

"An A.S.C. man!" thought Auberon. "Doesn't know a signal when he hears it." The sound of the engine changed for a moment as the car reached the avenue's end and debouched into the most famous of the great roads running east from the sea to the front; then the steady purr was resumed; and in a few minutes more the car itself came into sight as a rushing black speck on the white star-lit dust of the road where it climbed a bare down in the east; it stood lifted up for a moment, huge on the sky-line, and then dipped swiftly down over the crest of the ridge, out of hearing and sight.

Brett, the sergeant in charge of the drivers and cars, was

now plunging downstairs from his loft under the roof of a many-columned Temple of Flora. Brett was in trousers, unlaced boots and a shirt with its tails flying free. He had a rifle, too, and a full bandolier.

"You're a good un to sleep, Sergeant," said Auberon. "Here's a car gone."

"Heard nothing, Sir, only the 'Rally,'" said Brett. "I thought Fritz was come."

They examined. The key of the yard gate was still in the lock. A car was gone, right enough. But no man was missing; every one of those healthy organisms had slept through the whole episode. Auberon sent Brett back to his loft and returned alone to the sleeping château. He followed, backwards, the route of the moving light that he had seen—up the broad, shallow stairs, under the darkling tapestry picture of Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac, and so along the first-floor corridor to the west wing, whence it had started. Colin's bedroom door was ajar, and Auberon tip-toed in to see was he awake and to ask if he had heard anything. But there was no Colin there; some one had lain on the bed, but not in it; folded pyjamas lay on a chair, and a candlestick, poised on a pile of French comedies bound in pink and blue paper, stood by its head; the memoirs of Benvenuto Cellini lay open, face down, on the counterpane at its side. So? It was Colin, then? Well, it was rather a relief! Heaven be thanked, he was Auberon's superior in rank; Auberon had not to keep him in order.

V

The little stir had done Auberon good. Something to do. something to do—that was the thing, in all tempests and troubles; so long as something called out to be done on the nail, you could fight off black care.

He only found his bed by feeling for it: a waist-deep mist

submerged it now. From the star-lit air round his head he looked out over this pallid quilt. Good old mist; that was the stuff to be prayed for. If prayer be not the form of kneeling and using the vocative case, but the bending up of every fibre of your heart into a passion of humble hope, he may be said to have prayed then for the great rush of victory that might let Victor live. And if some better state of oneself is all the answer that prayer can hope for, his had its measure of efficacy too. A kind of peace possessed him for two minutes; before the third was up he was asleep, with just an hour to go before he should be called to breakfast by lamplight with his Scandinavian friend and bring him to see the battle at dawn.

CHAPTER XXIII

I

AT 2 A.M., to the tick, Auberon was awaked by the alarum clock which an old N.C.O. keeps somewhere in his vitals. At three he and Colonel Nordern, his charge, were to start for the battle-field, in a car, to see history made. The attaché had been all on fire last night to be there in good time and miss nothing.

For some seconds Auberon's waking mind was filled with nothing but joy at the muffling mist—wet pillowy bulks of it that tumbled slowly about the meadow. Then he remembered; the new misery flooded back and swamped everything. Still, there was something that had to be done. From job to job you could always hold on. Besides, the mist was still good; it fought for Victor and Molly.

He had finished his breakfast alone, and the car, with his kit for a week packed on board, was palpitating at the château door, when an orderly brought the message; "Colonel Nordern's compliments to Captain Garth, and the Colonel thinks hadn't they better give the fog time to lift?"

Auberon was not surprised: he had conducted many attachés. Nor could he cold-pig the sluggard and make him get up: he was a neutral and had to be petted. So Auberon sent his chauffeur back to bed, lit a pipe and listened till the mess-room clock struck three with an expression of blank frustration in its voice. Then he went out to the front of the house to loiter the lost time away, stood for a while under its sightless face of drawn blinds, and then walked on a little and sat on the low stone parapet of the bridge that carried the drive across the tumbling bay below the mill. The constant din of the weir sounded friendly; it was the noise that had been in his ears whenever he went to sleep or

woke up, as a child, and any good old thing that did not fall to pieces was treasurable now.

Morning broke as he sat; a dark grey opaqueness blenched till it was a white one. It was very thick. Immured in a tiny cell of visibility he could hear the steadily advancing munch of a cow feeding onwards, somewhere in the outer misty world; and then the first hoarse twitter or creak of birds still sleepy, like military attachés; and then the distant drone of some car early out on the great road—a sound of little moment to him till it suddenly changed for a few seconds, ceased, and began again; its distinctness was increasing quickly, showing that the invisible car had turned into the avenue and was now nearing the bridge at high speed. Just short of the bridge the road swerved a little; if a strange driver scorched in this mist he would probably miss the swerve and go straight into the lasher.

Auberon jumped up and ran forward. "Halt, you there!" he shouted to the improvident Jehu. The non-ignorable barrack-square rasp was in his voice, and the brakes of the car went instantly on, with a brutal scrunch on the road. He walked on a few yards and out of the mist there emerged the ravished car. Colin was at its wheel, magnificent in an imposing flying-coat of reddish-brown leather that he had cadged through a friend in the Air Force.

"Morning," Colin said, in his light way, though it seemed to Auberon that the lightness was a little haggard or worn. "A misty, moisty morning."

Auberon at least knew every word of the nursery rhymes that Molly used to sing to him in the years of their first common bereavement. "'There I met an old man, clothéd all in leather,'" he rejoined, perhaps a little grimly. Colin's midnight jaunt puzzled the man who had read his own commission over very seriously when he became an officer.

However—thanks be!—Colin was not under him. "Had a good night?" he asked, more sociably.

"Never ask that," Colin said, "of the rake-helly cat when he comes home with the milk. Life is a broken toy, friend Bron, at these impossible hours."

There was a little pause till Auberon said, "What about stowing the car?"

Colin laughed oddly. "Oh, practical man! Lilies I bring you, charred in the fire, and roses trampled in mud, and youth a mistake, and man's estate a regret, and the brief candle guttering dirtily out. And you, that know how to live—you that have beaten us all without knowing it—there you stand in your virgin glory of innocence, bejewelled with all the regalia of dawn, and ask lost souls if they hadn't better stick cars into stables! Oh, I'll do it."

The wild talk blew past Auberon's mind, or through it, as other wild winds blow through a tree. "You see," he said, "Brett will be shamming asleep till you've run the car in, lest he have to say who it was."

"And you——?"

"Better hurry," said Auberon.

The car moved on at once. "Wait!" Colin said as it went.

II

Auberon went back to his seat at the bridge. He heard the key grind and the car go in and cease from its labours and Colin steal across to the Temple of Flora to hang the key on its nail in the drivers' mess-room, whence he had taken it.

Then Colin came back to the bridge and stood opposite Auberon. "You understood me?" Colin asked.

"I made out you'd been *cherching la femme*, as they say."

"I found her," said Colin. "Victor and her."

"Hullo!" Auberon stared.

"Yes," said Colin, with a queer trace of aghastness in his voice, through all the rant. "Victor—Adonis—Endymion—he that shook Diana herself with his beauty. He's serf to an oversexed slut—oh! a polecat, a termagant. You could see in a twinkling how it had happened. The shrew had been short of a man to clean pig-sties and serve her libidinous body. Then Victor came by, and she grabbed him."

"You saw him!" Auberon exclaimed.

"Yes. And the she-Minotaur. She hung round, growling and snarling, lest I should carry him off."

"You meant to?" Admiration mingled with Auberon's amazement. To Auberon's mind, suffused through every tissue with the pride of willing discipline, the notion of rescuing Victor from justice had not once occurred, even as a temptation to be resisted or a possibility to be dismissed. He thought for a moment and added: "You'd known it was he?"

"Lord! no. I only wanted to cheat Immals out of his kill, for a lark. Perhaps a bit of fraternity, too, with all deserters. You see I've been the whole-hog *embusqué*. I funked the war sooner than any poor devil that has got shot for it. *Ecce signum!*" Colin touched with a finger the two wide rows of ribbons on his tunic—ribbons of medals and orders, British and foreign, conferred for the valour he had not shown—the D.S.O., the Mons Star, the Legion of Honour, the Russian Order of St. Stanislas, the Roumanian Order of St. Michael the Brave, the Siamese Order of Rama for Military Merit, the Croce di Guerra, the order of the Tower and the Sword—all pledges of his fidelity to the places where such things most abound. "Cowards, you know, shoulder to shoulder. Dastards, tail to tail."

Again the hot air blew unnoticed past Auberon's mind. "What," he asked intently, "could you do with him?"

"Drop him in the open, anyhow. Run that filthy hound out of scent."

"Did you?"

"No. He wouldn't come. He didn't dare. He's broken. Some one had tried, before me, to get him away. Some one incredible."

"Molly?" Auberon asked, with the talk on the bridge at Étaples rushing back into his mind.

"How the deuce she got there——! I suppose the way the shot stags make for the place they were born in."

"It's this 'surgical team' stunt," Auberon said. "He told you?"

"Yes, in a dull, horrible way, with no feeling for her—like some old invalid who gets cross with anybody that does a thing for him. I made out that Molly had found a small kid astray on the road. There was only the one whole house in sight, so she had carried the kid to the farm—you know how she looks with a child in her arms?"

"Yes."

"Shows you the Sistine Madonna was not all my eye. Old Raphael had seen some one like her."

"Yes."

"I fancy Victor put his village-idiot face on when she came in sight. He did it for me too, at first—dribbled spittle on his chin, and grinned. He told me what happened next. I'll give you his words, if I can. 'She said, "Victor!" She put the child down quickly and ran to me, crying out, "Victor!" I couldn't do anything—there was Louise looking out of the window. I suppose I just fiddled my fingers around the rim of my bowler. That stopped her. She said, "Something frightful has happened?" I said, "Yes. I deserted, years and years ago. I'm in hiding." She wouldn't believe it at first. She kept saying, "Try hard to remember. Try to think what *really* happened. You

were wounded—delirious—you wandered about——" No, no, I kept telling her—nothing had hit me—I had deserted, just deserted. Didn't lots of people desert? Why couldn't she see? She really is slow—always was. At last she seemed to take it in. The child was crying and she took it up again and it stopped crying and felt about, all over her face, with its hands. When she'd thought for a time she said I must go quickly and give myself up—I was to tell everything, just as it was; then they would only send me to prison—she'd wait for me till I came out and we'd go to some place where nobody knew and start all over again. As if one ever *could*! I got tired of hearing her. Seemed as if she *wouldn't* face the facts. "Can't you see?" I said. "I've got a friend." I think she began to see then. "Are you married?" she said. She hadn't any tact, you see. So I pointed to the child. She put it down gently and kissed the top of its head, with her face pressed down on it, ruffling its hair—her face wasn't in sight for quite a long time. At last she looked at me and there was nothing wrong with her face. She wasn't put out or crying. She just said, "Good-bye" and shook hands the way a real friend does—she was dull, but she had generosity.' That was his yarn—I think I've remembered it all."

"He wouldn't bolt for it?" Auberon asked, idly, with nothing but Molly's smitten face before his mind.

"He didn't dare."

"Dare?"

"Louise had come out of the house by that time. Some damned instinct must have told her what I was after. He took a scared sort of look at the black scowl she had. Then he said, 'I can't do it.'"

"Was that all?"

"No. I got him apart for a second, before I cleared out. I offered him my revolver, in case he should

want a way out. 'I've filled all the chambers,' I told him."

"Good!" said Auberon, lover of life as he was.

"No. No good at all. She must have seen—it was pretty near dawn by then, and a grey light coming. She yelled something I couldn't make out and he shuffled off in a hell of a hurry, rubbing his old boots along the ground, to keep 'em on—they weren't laced up. I was going—I was just fording the puddle there is from the dung at these farms—when I heard a bestial noise in the house—a sort of dog-fighting noise, but with only one dog giving tongue. I tell you, friend Bron, there are worse noises in Hell than we wot of. I was sure I heard twice the sound of a whacking great slap on a face, and then the fury opened the door and screamed something foul at my back and my poor old revolver came whizzing into the dung."

"I hope you picked it up," said Auberon. Thrown into a shoreless-seeming sea of miseries, he grabbed at the next thing to see to, the next thing to do, as if it were a plank. The number of Colin's revolver was down on some list; if it were found lying there, Colin, too, would be "for it."

"Yes. Pride wasn't on, just then. It had not been a good night for us shirkers. Hullo!" He broke off, to listen.

"Yes," said Auberon. "That's it." He had stood up, impelled by some dim instinct, as if in the presence of the mystery of death. Distant, almost dreamy, so muted by its remoteness as not to efface the low sound of the cattle's teeth plucking the grass, there had begun in a single instant the multitudinous rolling of all our innumerable guns.

"Preliminary bombardment?" said Colin.

"No. None to-day. The men start with the guns. They've just started. The men, the men!" Stung by the clearness of his mind's vision, Auberon had begun to walk up

and down and across, on the bridge. Ruthven and Booker, Cart and McGurk—he saw the beads of wet hung by the fog from McGurk's big moustache as they advanced, and Booker saying, "Now we shawn't be long," and Cart saying nothing, but thinking for every one.

"Is it unbearable, Bron?" Colin asked.

"What?"

"Not to be there—at the centre of everything—where the flame burns?"

"Is that how it takes you?" said Auberon.

"No. I don't suffer. There's nothing in me to take light at these times."

"You've just done what I'd never have dared."

"Mere devilry—just to do down our friend Immals. This isn't your lovely charge, is it?"

Colonel Nordern, a vision of beauty in horizon-blue and silver, many gem-like medal ribbons and a loose operatic cloak of darker blue, was indeed stepping daintily forth to study the heavens. In half an hour Auberon and he were crossing the bridge in their car to see what they still could of the most critical battle of the war. The mist had thinned already to a kind of atmospheric tenderness that only just bated the brilliant edge of an unclouded sun.

III

As a boy standing on a garden wall looks down on the lawn below, so did Auberon and Nordern look that morning from the high northern bank of the Somme, a few miles to the east of Amiens, and see the war's greatest battle rolling swiftly eastwards across the low plain of Santerre, south of the river. To Auberon, a witness of all our crawling and fruitless advances of the year before, its swift decisiveness savoured of miracle. Nothing but a marvel of rushing victory and happy early peace could save what was left of

Victor now: and, lo! here was the marvel; the turn had come; like a great ship rushing across a hundred miles of ocean to where a spark that cries for help is sputtering at the masthead of some small foundering craft, victory seemed suddenly to have taken wings to fly to Victor's deliverance.

For four days Auberon watched the battle rolling over the level plain: in two the enemy was driven back twelve miles; by the fourth he had lost 400 guns; more than twenty thousand of his men were prisoners. Then, like some capricious-seeming tempest, the battle was suddenly stayed; it rolled away to the south, and for four days Auberon and Nordern heard, like the receding thunder after storms, the distant roar of the French guns that covered Humbert's infantry while they re-took the Lassigny plateau, and then, for four days more, the still more distant guns of Mangin driving the enemy off the heights between the Oise and the Aisne. At last, on August 20, the uproar died away in the far south, only to break out next day in the north, when the Third and the Fourth British Armies launched the attack that was to carry them within ten days across the whole of the thrice-fought battle-field of the Somme, right over the dividing ridge between the rivers of Northern France and the great plain of Central Europe. And then, as before, the prosperous battle was checked in full course; silence fell on Bapaume and Péronne while, farther north again, the din rose east of Arras and the British First Army hustled the enemy back, through the great outwork of his Drocourt-Quéant switch, into the elongated fortress of the Hindenburg Line. And yet, once more, as, it might have seemed, the cup of victory was put down undrained, the centre of the war shifted and from the extreme south, just within hearing, there came, on September 12, reverberations of gun-fire in the east of the Argonne—the voice of the First American Army as it

encircled and captured the high fortalice of St. Michel, perched above the twisting Meuse.

All the British share in these swiftly consecutive operations Auberon carefully showed to the guests of the British Commander-in-Chief. He never had a day off, nor a chance to look in at Vaurignies and ferret for news of Victor. Now and then a day would be wasted in taking one of his charges back to Boulogne, putting him on the Staff boat for Folkestone and picking another up at the gangway of the boat next to arrive. During these days he felt a dread lest the war should go wrong and lose pace while his back was turned to it. We were winning; that was sure; England was safe; but were we winning fast enough to save Victor? Part of this anxiety, no doubt, he carried in his friendly face on his countless visits to the Staffs of Corps, Divisions, Brigades, batteries and battalions, to introduce his companion of the moment or to ask would they be in any one's way if they went to some good advanced observation post that he knew of.

By these visits he had made many acquaintances, and the cheerful looks with which they all greeted his coming puzzled him, since he always seemed to be bothering people for something. However, he made the most of his chances of picking up tips about war from these genial generals and colonels. He wanted furiously now to learn about war. He had only seen fighting, a sight which tells you nothing about strategy, though it does about some other things. It came to him now that he had got to see large, in a sense, in order to judge what chance Victor might have. He must get the knack of making out what this or that bit of fighting was for, as a part of the whole war—what distant operations had to do with one another—how some indecisive battle far away south in Champagne might still be the means of clearing the Belgian coast or making the Germans go back from a salient north of Armentières. For weeks he questioned the wise when-

ever he met them, and pondered deeply when alone, till at last, with the suddenness of a heel slipping into a tight riding-boot, he came to get the hang of what was going on.

IV

It came to him in a parable, as it were. He seemed to see a crowd of men gathered in front of a long, closed canvas tent and trying to break into it, while other men, crowded inside and not seeing through, were trying to keep them out. A few of the men outside were told off to make a rush at one point in the wall of the tent, drive their fists into it, make it bulge inwards and scare the defenders into thinking that here was to be the assailants' main and final attempt to break right through the canvas. So the defenders would crowd to that spot and tire themselves with frantic efforts to keep the tent wall from being pressed in to the point of breaking. Then the fellow in command outside would order a few of his men to beat against the tent wall at a different place, and the garrison would stampede in alarm from the first dent in the canvas to the second, there to tire themselves a bit more, only to find their cause for alarm reappearing in a third place and a fourth and so on, as soon as the bout before had left them breathless and weary.

By September 25 the long wall of the tent had been battered, now here and now there, in effect everywhere. The canvas was tough; the fellows behind it were stout; they had rushed hither and thither to draw it taut as often as our incalculable buttings against it made it belly or sag. But, all August and September, it was wearing thin; the men behind must be terribly tired. And our men were tremendous; they did incredible things; they bluffed their way through seeming certainties of death, flung themselves into extinction, without a thought or a tremor, as people will do to get a child out of a building on fire. With a

tumultuous exaltation Auberon gazed at the embattled crowd of Nottingham and Derby clerks slithering down one grassy bank of the deep canal cutting near Bellicourt, swimming and wading across the canal and scrambling—the remnant of them—up the far bank to storm the entrenched machine guns that spouted from its summit. The whole war was moving faster than ever. It was racing furiously. And Auberon had a sense of looking on at some heroic race, a rush to bring off a rescue almost past hope. It was as if the S.O.S. that his agonised fear for Victor sent up on that night in the Vaurignies meadow had set the whole front glistening with the stars of answering rockets. A tropical growth of new hope began in his mind; he felt as if he were almost in the confidence of some vast overruling force that, with a god's disregard of mere human equity, changed the course of the greatest of wars to bring salvation to one poor deserter.

V

But victory still has her price. In her most prosperous tide you will find an eddy here and there set twisting back against the flood by some snag or boulder. Even when Gideon's trumpets were blowing and all the lamps flaming free, there must have been stout men of Midian who would not flee from Jehovah himself without turning to stab a few of his favourites first.

On a morning late in September Auberon had to escort to the front a kind old Roumanian general who desired to see our infantry at their work. Auberon knew a good place; it was quite close to St. Quentin; for there his own Comfies had just gone into the line to share in this morning's attack on a German "key position" of some little tactical value. For General Robiescu any troops would do; so Auberon might as well try to see his old friends.

He found them, without any trouble. The ground which

they had attacked was much broken—a good place to hold and a hard one to take. The Germans were out of it now, for the last time, but the fight of a few hours before must have swayed to and fro for a while and enemy counter-attacks had momentarily recovered some points taken by the impetuous advance of British troops not strong enough at first to keep them.

Where one of these freakish eddies had curled for an hour or two and had then been smoothed out by the rising tide of our advance, Auberon found his friends. They lay in a short length of sunk road, with broken apple-trees over it—Cart, Ruthven, Booker, McGurk and five or six more. The sun was already hot on the place; hundreds of insolent flies rose from the bodies, buzzing resentfully at Auberon's approach, and then quickly crowded into the blackening gashes again and feasted silently. All, he could see, had died by the bayonet; not very many men did, in the whole of the war, but the few were not to be mistaken ; Auberon would have known them anywhere by the impossible contortions of their bodies, their spines grotesquely bent, their last wrigglings of agony capriciously arrested in the most fantastic poses and then petrified thus by the coming on of rigidity; their faces, too, were different—more horror in the look; their wide eyes stared more wildly up at the sky, as if the last of their thoughts had been, "And so there *is* no God."

"These were my friends," he said to the Balkan general. He must not disown these poor guys that looked as if some devil had carved them in grinning contempt of human dignity and courage. "My first comrades, in my regiment."

The general looked at the thick outer ring of grey-coated enemy dead surrounding the little inner ring of khaki-clad grotesques. Not being English, and yet being a man, and a kind one, he drew himself up, saluted, and said, "They

were comrades for a King." He touched his guide's vacant sleeve. "And you, my friend, a comrade for such men."

For a moment Auberon had lost sight of the war as a whole and the working out of the great Foch's design. It was only as if these dear fellows had seen The Beak in mortal danger and rushed in only too headlong, to help an old friend. So it had been at all these fights; so had the wounded died at Bellicourt when they rolled down the canal banks into the water and great bubbles had risen from their lips while they died. Everywhere men were dying in order that something might live. Something better than they? Plodding and honest in all his secret thoughts, like a workman who works as well with his master's back turned, Auberon did not try to make out to himself that a life so hopelessly broken as Victor's was worth a life like Alf Cart's. No, the world's best were perishing still, just as the best of them all had perished on the Cross, on some dim chance that this might do good to those who were worse.

And yet, could one be rational and set one's face against that mad waste and unreason of atonement, with all its squandering of perfection, just to preserve the imperfect? Could he, if the power were his, give the order that Victor must die in shame rather than he should be saved by sacrifices like this? He asked it, as straight as he could, of himself. But no clear answer came, only a mental flinching away from the thought of Molly hearing of Victor's end. It was like seeing her face bashed in with the butt; the horror of it paralysed all reasoning; anything sooner than that! And might it not possibly be that, if God loved all the world as he himself loved Molly and Victor, God would feel something like that and might be ready to give a part of himself to relieve the most worthless poor devil from some sort of annihilation. Oh! it was all very difficult.

CHAPTER XXIV

I

THE night was moonless but fine, with a good show of stars, when Auberon's dusty car turned out of the great road into the avenue at Vaurignies—past ten o'clock on the 27th of September. His nice Roumanian had just sailed from Boulogne and no one else had to be met there till the late afternoon of to-morrow. Auberon was to have a night's holiday.

The lighted house, its background of forested hill, the familiar trees of the avenue and the bickering of the little lasher under the bridge had a kind of friendliness; like some early home revisited after a good many years and much complicating experience, they seemed to have kept a simplicity lost by himself. By Jove, he felt old; had he, perhaps, lived through more than he knew since the 7th of August? He had been a bit worried, of course; but what people involved in tragic messes in books suffered was evidently something much more severe and important.

His car crossed the bridge; the noise of the lasher lessened behind him; little sounds from the house rose into clearness. The night was warm; many windows were open; more lamps were burning than usual; two cars with ardent headlights stood at the door; there must be guests to-night. Yes, several voices poignant with the wasted beauty of marred youth were soon drivelling sloppily out into the night from a window—one of the speakers quite drunk, another less drunk, a third and fourth not really drunk, but pretending. "Wha' the hell car's that?" "Tha' my car?" "Gosh! Ol' Garth's car!" "Ol' man Garth, back from the wars!" "Good ol' Garth!" "Come in, Garth." "Have a d-d-drink, Garth."

He knew the guests—four subalterns of a cavalry regiment

that used to have rest billets in the village, off and on. But nobody from the mess seemed to be seeing them off; they were just trickling out by themselves, to go home. That was odd. What were all their hosts doing? Well, here was something that had to be done. They must be seen off, before he went in.

Slowly, with many maudlin farewell cordialities, the cavaliers passed away into the night, and Auberon stood at the château door, as his father did at home, waiting till parting guests should be too far away to hear the door close behind them.

While he stood so, a light appeared at the end of the avenue, moved obliquely for a moment and then straightened its course and drew in on the house. He knew what that was—the despatch-rider bringing the post of the day—late because of the late tide that was timing Auberon's trips to Boulogne to-day and to-morrow. Round the curving drive, within the near gates, the head-light of the urgent motor-cycle wheeled like the revolving flash of a lighthouse, searching with its whirling brilliance a great arc of a circle of limestone wall, gravel and verdure.

Auberon said a word to the rider, Corporal Tolley—was his machine running all right, or stiff in the steerage again?

"Champion, Sir, thank you," the corporal said. "I've two letters for you, Sir," he added. He searched in his bag, holding it under his head-light.

By that light Auberon saw on one letter the writing of Molly. He put it into his pocket unopened. On no moments but the most worthy was reading such as that to be conferred. He made straight for the room where he had left Immals talking, the night the smash came.

II

It was horrible. It was as if Immals had never got up and gone, in all those seven weeks. There he was, exactly as before, still befouling the air. Just such another court of listeners, too, was round him now as in August—two of them, in fact, the same, and the rest like them—a chubby Staff-lieutenant up from a base, a Corps-Commander's A.D.C. and two or three pretty children whom some potent relation or other had not had the heart to send through the fire to honour; they hung upon Immals' lips, while he tickled them with drams and snacks of his Grand Guignol muck. His face looked fouler than ever—more pouchy under the eyes, more blackish-green, nearer to black altogether than when Colin had said, "A judge only puts on a tiny black cap, but Immals blacks his whole mug." And yet Auberon had to listen, hungrily, just on the chance. For nobody could tell as much as this carrion crow of what Auberon hungered to learn.

Immals, of course, was spinning some yarn of the knacker's yard that he kept. When Auberon came in, the pink lads looked round, rather shamefaced, as if an acquaintance had caught them looking eagerly on at some filthy affair in a street instead of kicking the offender.

"Cheerio, Immals," Auberon said—he was a host in this mess and the barbaric virtue had to be practised, even to crows whose trade was to pick out the eyes of sick sheep. "Had a good day?"

"Damned long un," said Immals. He was only a coarse artist; he laboured crudely his air of grim significance.

"Up at dawn, you know," the A.D.C. babbled. His girlish mouth was defaced with a laugh that tried to be knowing: really it was hysterical.

Immals resumed his interrupted debauch. "I was just

saying," he said, and went on. Auberon, a little aloof from the group, fiddled with *Punch* and listened furtively, just on the chance.

"I don't know," Immals was saying, "what other Armies may do, but we find it best in this Army to use a small, cobble-paved yard that I struck, with a good high wall round it. Keeps 'em more quiet—to feel they're shut in—see? They're not all like this freak that we put through it to-day. They're not nuts on being done in."

So some poor rat or other had only asked to be in the pit with the terriers—just to be out of it all. Gosh! what a life the poor beast must have had.

Immals talked on. "We keep the sun out, in this Army. Makes 'em jib, to see it—they don't want to leave it."

The Staff-lieutenant asked some question too husky for Auberon to hear it.

"No," Immals answered. "In this Army our firing-party is ten. Two of 'em fire with blank—not one—that's only in story-books. No, the men don't load the rifles they use—if they did they'd know who had the blank."

"What about the fouling, though? The barrel's different after firing blank," the Staff-lieutenant insisted, as though he had just heard that he was to be one of the firing-party himself.

"That's seen to, of course," replied Immals. "The men ground arms the moment they've fired. Then they're marched out. Then the rifles are shuffled and other men clean 'em."

"Seems good enough," the A.D.C. admitted guardedly.

Immals looked at the pink youth as if he had certified God to be just fit, perhaps, to run errands. "All the trouble this morning," Immals went on austerely, "came of a fool of a new sergeant-major. You'd hardly believe it—he had forgotten the gas-mask?"

"Gas-mask?" The cherubic A.D.C. almost gasped. "What's that for?" he said.

Immals stared at such innocence. "Why, of course." he said, "for this swine Nevin."

III

"Shock" is a curious thing. It may flurry or calm you; bend you to the point of breaking or straighten you up; knock the pert off their perches and put the shy at their ease. In the moment of hearing Victor's name Auberon seemed to have time for long trains of thought; all that there was to ponder lay spread out at once before his mind like the many rivers and towns that you see from a 'plane which flies high in clear weather. Victor dead utterly now, and the last smear daubed on his name; Molly to be guarded, if it might be, from the sear of this branding-iron—he almost heard it hissing into her flesh while she stood white and still, abiding fate. What did they do in these cases? Tell a man's next-of-kin? Or was there some regular lie? Were the Victors simply gazetted as "Died"? Oh, no—why, of course, he had often seen the dead bodies nailed up, names and all, in General Orders. He could see Victor's epitaph:

GENERAL ROUTINE ORDERS

by

F.M. Sir Douglas Haig, G.C.B., G.C.V.O., K.C.I.E.,
C. in C. British Armies in France.

Adjutant-General's Branch.

Courts Martial.

No. 89507 Private V. F. J. Nevin was tried by Field General Court Martial on the following charge:

"When on Active Service, deserting His Majesty's Service."

The accused absented himself from near the front line in

November 1915, and remained absent till apprehended in a place behind the line in September 1918; he was then in civilian clothes, without identity-disc or pay-book.

The sentence of the court was "To suffer death by being shot."

The sentence was duly carried out at 5.51 A.M. on September 27, 1918.

But now he must go on parade, with his face turned to wood, and pump Immals while he was there to be pumped: for Victor might have said something, left some message—a letter perhaps.

Immals was saying how "in this Army" the plan was to blindfold the prisoner by putting a gas-mask over his head, with the eye windows round at the back. "It's much more use than a hanky. Covers the whole of his face, so the men can't see the face working. Sure to put 'em off if they do. As a matter of fact, it's what happened to-day."

"Did he say things?" Auberon asked. With conscious cunning he aped the laboured callousness of Immals' puny courtiers.

"Lord, no! We've stopped all that in this Army, ages ago. Some of 'em used to make a hell of a noise—praying and talking. It put the men off. So now we put cotton-wool in their mouths."

"What did go wrong, then?" the A.D.C. breathlessly asked.

"The blighter's face kept working," Immals said. His voice was changing. "Flicking like hell," he snarled, with a queer, rising fury. "Putting the men off—the scab!—so that only one bullet hit him—one out of eight—and that only in the shoulder! The swine was not even stunned! Wide-awake as I am, and that bloody face of his, working!"

"And then?" Auberon asked. Once driven to it, he acted morbid curiosity quite decently well.

"Usual routine. March the men off. A.P.M. finishes prisoner. Revolver well into the mouth—muzzle turned slightly upwards. *I* didn't take long with the cur."

Just for an instant Auberon closed his eyes, to see the brains that had spun Victor's delicate fabrics of fancy and wit bespatter the wall of the slaughterer's yard. The chubby Staff-lieutenant may have had imagination too, for he went quickly to one of the open windows, put his head out and was sick over a Malmaison rose that grew against the south wall. But Auberon had business in hand. "He said nothing at all?" he asked Immals again.

"We don't ask 'em," said Immals, "to make a last speech from the cart."

Without making the action uncivilly pointed, Auberon fetched a bottle from the sideboard. "A bit drappie?" he asked Immals politely, and Immals held out his tumbler.

"Say when," said Auberon, as he poured, but Immals fell into abstraction till the common strength of grog had been well passed: then he suddenly said, "Enough! enough!" like a man rebuking some excess that nobody could have expected. While Immals added soda-water with a frugal hand, Auberon said, "He left no message, or letter, or anything? Some of 'em do, I suppose?"

"Some of 'em—yes. Only the other day there was one—a second-lieutenant—we shot him for cowardice. He sat up writing letters by a flash-lamp, all the night before—four long uns, all to his mother, with dates on ahead, full of all sorts of lies about the great time he was having. He asked my Sergeant-Major to post 'em, at intervals of a week. 'That'll give her a good month,' he said. But not this swab to-day."

"He did nothing at all?"

"He just went to hell, the bloody scut, working his jaws." Immals spoke savagely, and his blackish-green complexion had grown blacker; convulsive twitchings and clenchings wrenched its flaccid muscles. The man was screwing himself up to a species of retrospective fury, working up in his neurotic little soul a spasm of lust for killing without danger to himself. Auberon had seen men look like that. Once, when the Comfies had taken a trench, he had seen a man trampling frenziedly upon a wounded German's face, stringing himself up with shouts of incoherent rage and filth to grind the agonised features into a jelly of flesh, mud, blood and smashed bone till the body ceased wriggling.

But now he had got what information there was. He must go and think what could be done.

IV

He made for a small room, that he and a few other conducting officers used as a place of refuge from social activity in their few hours off duty. No one was there; the empty room had a welcoming look, with a shaded oil lamp on the table, and big pine logs burning bright on the open hearth with small noises of hissing and crackling from the damp wood and the dry. Outside the little zone of steady lamplight and that of the flickering firelight the room was dark; through a slit between the drawn curtains Auberon saw some chilly-looking stars. Out of doors a wind was rising; it pressed fitfully on the windows; it whined round a corner and sniffed at cracks.

Auberon drew a chair near the fire and sat gazing at the flames, loving them. He had always loved fires—the very idea of fires; his old trench life, with its bouts of bruising, quelling, spirit-crushing cold, had added to that love. Whatever changed, whatever failed, fires were friendly and good to you.

Something had happened since he came into the room. There was nothing at once to be done; and, with nothing to do, his endurance was collapsing. The manner of Victor's death hurt him dreadfully now; the pain of it filled mind and heart just as the pain of bitter cold occupies the whole body, brutalises and cows it, torments all your flesh with dull tortures like toothache, drags you down to be a mere mass of spiritless animal tissues without courage or hope.

He sat perfectly still and gazed hard at the fire: he gave himself wholly up to mere consciousness of its kind heat: he made all other thoughts wait; presently, presently, he would come to them; all that he could do with, as yet, was this shining assurance that something unbedevilled remained in the world.

Like blood taking motion again in a man numbed with cold, animation slowly returned to Auberon's mind. It fumbled about, feebly at first; it groped round for good things to take hold of; he thought of roofs that keep out the winter, of new milk and the brown Autumn goodness of wide fields of corn, and the sunshine of June mornings in England; and then of some of the men he had known—his father and Cart and McGurk and Black, men of the breed who eagerly gave the world more than they took at its hands; and then the thought of all these seemed to lead up to the thought of Molly and culminate in her. With a new clearness he saw her, not in her beauty only but as the most perfect, for him, of all the world-saving souls that are as utterly simple, constant and kind as fires and stars. Then he remembered her letter, took it out and read it by the mixed light of the lamp and the fire.

The letter had come amazingly fast; it was dated only that day.

Dear Bron,

I'm a beastie, not to have written before. No excuse, either, for work has eased off, only too much. The "surgical team" work was hard. Once, when we were at Ranvert l'Étang, my surgeon did big operations for thirty-six hours on end. He'd stop for five minutes, to eat, and then go on again. I want work like that—just to go pegging on at something humdrum that's worth while. It seems to keep things real. Ever feel that way? I had a bad dream about you—not dead or wounded, but just looking lost, as if you felt things weren't real.

I have a new job now—a ward full of men who are said to have wounded themselves—all under arrest. There's an armed guard at the door of the tent, and barbed wire all round. They're just like other wounded—heartrendingly obliged by the least thing one does. Most of them were volunteers, like you. One had a D.C.M. They'll all be tried as soon as they're patched up—perhaps shot.

I wonder what's right. Of course they have failed—tried to do more than they could, and broken down over it. Still, they did try—they took their chance of losing their courage as you lost your arm. I almost think they're the most horribly wounded of all and have given up most—become idiots or cowards and not cripples only, through having tried to do right.

I don't say they shouldn't be punished. Punishment is such a mystery. At school, when I'd done something rotten, I used to feel, in a way, that I had a right to be punished—it would be almost cruel if one were let off—it would be like not letting you have any soap if you made your face dirty. But one thing I'm sure of—it's rotten to punish them first and then to treat them as if the punishment itself didn't clear them—as if they were "untouchables" still and ought to be cut in the street, or hushed up if they're dead. Don't you believe in expiation? I do—a sort of utter washing away of whatever was wrong by a scalding stream of clean pain, so that at last you can be as if no wrongness had ever come in.

Does this only read like the stuff people talk who throw word

about without caring? I do mean it, but can't explain any better, so please make sense of it. If we could only see everything just as it is, the way they say that God can, I do believe that we might be touched most of all, long after this war, by the thought of those men who had died in the worst torment of all that there are, because they were too weak to bear as much as they had tried to bear for the sake of us all.

Must stop—here comes an interruption, and my letter only just begun. Are you all right? I am.

Your affectionate

Molly.

Had she known that Victor was dead when she wrote? Or only that he had been taken? Or only what he knew her to have known although she did not know that he knew it? One, at least, of these torturing pieces of knowledge must have been wringing her while she wrote? Perhaps the worst of all. But she would not let on. She still left her young brother such chance as he had of not knowing what Victor had done; and also she tried to arm him with any thought that might help him against the first onset of horror and grief, if he should come to find out. That was what Molly could do, under torture. He read her letter again. With her world darkened about her, she was like that, and the thought of her cleaned a soiled earth; it kept life noble.

He did not try to answer her now. They hardly ever answered each other's letters at once. If he did it to-night she might guess that he knew her secret, or part of it; he must leave it to her, to tell or keep, as freely as might be possible. He went out to his bed in the meadow, a man revived; for fortitude like Molly's is not used up in the act of enduring blows: it remains a great fire and lamp, like a sun, and lights and warms and vitalises all that it shines on.

CHAPTER XXV

I

NEXT evening Auberon went back to work. In the twilight he met the Staff boat at Boulogne, detected at the gangway's foot the famous author whom he was to pilot, whisked him off in a car by the coast road through Hardelot Forest and Camiers and fed him, amidst kitchen savours and steams, at the little thronged inn at Étaples. Then on through a mild autumn night, across darkened Montreuil, to undulate over the rumpled downland till they dropped steeply down to the deserted streets of Abbeville with its many searchlights patrolling the infested sky, and so by Flixecourt and Picquigny, up the narrowing Somme to Amiens, where they slept at the battered Hôtel du Rhin. Next day they took to the long straight-ruled road that passes through Albert, Bapaume, Cambrai and Valenciennes to Mons.

Auberon had to talk for most of the time. Like the servant who shows tourists round a great house, he had to be ready with something about whatever his charges might notice by the way. At first this had been a sad trial. Nothing at school or the University had suggested that history or architecture was a study worthy of any person of spirit. That of architecture might even conduce to long hair. But when he started work as pilot to the British front he noticed distinctly that the Army's foreign guests, of all nations, were impressed by the number of times he had to answer their enquiries with "Sorry—I don't know the first thing about it." So his inveterate habit, in trouble, of finding absorption and relief in the obvious next thing to do had set him mugging up in his spare hours—mostly in guide-books—quite a lot of subjects on which his education had thrown a minimum of light.

After some labour he had been able to show his various travelling companions the house where Napoleon had stayed at Étaples to plan the invasion of England with Ney; also the house where Robespierre (of whom Auberon knew nothing else) was born in Arras. He had explored in free hours the Forest of Crécy, knew where to find the wild boars and could show their sows trotting swiftly along its open glades, with their litter galloping astern. He had worried out, from Shakespeare and Baedeker, the plan of the battle of Agincourt—and this was particularly useful, because the battle-field lay within sight of the château where most of the Army's guests were put up. At architecture, too, he had swotted till it became so exciting to himself that he was afraid lest he should bore people with it. Whenever he took his military attachés and others up to the front by the great road from the coast near Montreuil to French Flanders he cautiously fished to find out whether they cared about houses; if so he would gently indicate the funny little air of Spanishness that some of the houses had at Hesdin, and more of them at St. Pol, and any number of them at Arras, where the Dons, he understood, had had it all their own way once and had then tried to push a bit west, but had had to come back. Finding some of his charges to be wearied by off days in Amiens, with no battles to amuse them, he had got up the interesting truths that the "House of the Sagittaire," in the Rue des Vergeaux, was held to be the true Renaissance stuff, and that Number 7 in the Rue St. Martin was reckoned a topping specimen of Louis Quinze, and Number 18 of Louis Seize. With a round of these *objets d'art* he would endeavour to entertain the guests of Britain, though always with extreme caution, as a man of indifferent education trading on a minute capital of knowledge.

This time there was no daylight wherein to practise æsthetics, as far as Amiens. And next morning, when there

was daylight, there were no buildings left to practise them on, after the car had gone a few miles farther east. So that peace which the world cannot give had to be sought through sustained efforts to impart purely military information. Up and down this long straight road, he explained, to and fro between Albert and Mons, the war had drifted its four years; it was the axis of the war, at any rate for us; it was the centre line, as it were, of the lawn-tennis court. Up it the British Regular Army had marched, full of hope, in the August of 1914. Back along it the Germans had pushed them, only to recede along it themselves in their turn after their check on the Marne; all the long battle of the Somme in 1916 had been fought astride of this road; eastwards along it the Germans had retreated under cover of night in the wintry early months of 1917 and westwards they had crowded back in their last great advance, in the following March; eastwards again along the same road they had for two months now been falling back. The flowing and ebbing tides of war had littered the great highway with their leavings. Auberon pointed them out. Its shining smoothness was the tarmac that British labour battalions had laid in the spring of last year for our advancing transport, and this spring the Germans' advancing transport had taken over the job of polishing it. Everywhere by the road were notices to troops in English or in German; on the ruins of wooden huts that both armies had shelled in succession, there could still be read "Y.M.C.A." and "Soldatenheim," "Zur res. Stellung" and "Delousing Station." On each side, wastes of blasted heath, an endless-looking veldt of thistles and poppies and self-sown traces of old peace-time harvests of beet and mustard and corn, were speckled, as far as their eyes could see, with two other innumerable growths that looked as if they too must be some common weed—two different species of rude wooden crosses standing, at every

rickety angle, over the dead that lay shallowly buried where they fell, the British crosses small and paintless, the German ones larger, heavier, with little eaved and painted roofs at their tops to keep the rain from washing out the name of the man that "hier ruht," as each of them said.

II

All these things did Auberon continue to show and interpret, at first perhaps a little mechanically—it was the thing to do next; it was his job; that was all. Then the exercise warmed his numb mind: he began, for the moment, to lose himself in it, as in the old games of football at school, that could keep care away for a while: he grew eager and vivid, as many simple people do when they tell you of things that they know by sight and not through books. And while he did his best to show how the war stood, it became strangely clear to himself; his mind, which no one had ever taught to see all the parts of any great thing in their wholeness and unity, was educating itself. He could see now, by dint of having to show some one else, what the German army's predicament was.

Till lately it had fought on ground that was as good as a part of Germany's own great square self. But now that ground was changing swiftly into a peninsula, with two seas eating eagerly into its neck on each side—striving to turn it into an island cut off. One great line of railway was the real neck of that peninsula. A mighty system of railways fed the German front, reinforced it, carried its wounded away and kept open its line of retreat. At Liège that system was gathered together into one east-and-west line as vital as the umbilical cord to a child yet unborn. East of Liège and west of Liège the system of railway spread itself out like a fan: at Liège it was as single to cut as a throat. And, once it was cut, all the German armies still left in the peninsula

that had turned island would have to surrender, however brave they might be.

What struck in this way the untutored mind of Auberon was even clearer, no doubt, to the super-trained talents of Ludendorff and Hindenburg. Only the day before Victor was shot, these two had added themselves to the forces unconsciously endeavouring to keep him alive: they had told their Kaiser that peace must now be offered at once: it was hopeless, they warned the poor wretch on the throne, to keep up the war. But the doomed egoist shrank from his own fall more than he did from letting ten or twenty thousand extra men be killed for nothing: so there came no rest for fighting men, nor amnesty for deserters, till Victor had been six weeks in his grave.

III

During those weeks it was Auberon's job to show the working-out of Foch's plan to many august civilians as well as the brisk and trim military attachés of the Allied and the neutral world. Some of the civilians were old friends. Wynnant was invited out to G.H.Q. because he knew every one there and was famous good company anywhere; Roads because he might bite unless he were constantly stroked; Wade because the old Radical was believed to be shaky as an upholder of war "to the bitter end," and a sight of the actual thing might brace up his *moral*; Ducat because the elegant "war work" of his tongue and pen for four whole years was held to merit reward: so just was G.H.Q., so politic, so penetrating in its knowledge of the human heart.

They all looked at the great sight with eyes that saw almost nothing. From far south, in the Argonne and Champagne, Americans and French were thrusting northward, digging furiously towards Liège, turning the menaced

peninsula's neck into an even narrower isthmus. And meanwhile, all along the peninsula's broad western face, French and English, Belgians and Americans were ceaselessly trying to penetrate to some point or other on the line of railway running north and south, behind the German front and parallel with it, through Brussels, Mons, Maubeuge, Hirson, Mézières, Sedan and Metz—to cut it and so to prevent the Germans from reaching the isthmus before it was severed. Pershing drove at Sedan, and Gouraud at Mézières, Haig at Mons and Maubeuge, and King Albert at Brussels through Ghent. By October 1 the whole of the Allied front roared and winked with the most continuous flashing and din in the whole war. For more than a month the great climax held on, incredibly, like a top note sustained for that time by some supernatural voice, till in the first days of November the American troops fought their way into Sedan, the British took Maubeuge, the French were at Hirson, and Belgian outposts east of Tronchiennes were looking across a few flooded fields at the towers of Ghent. The substance of victory had been won; the peninsula's neck was ours to cut when we chose; even of the peninsula the enemy's troops had no longer the run; nothing remained but to claim the formal and full admission of defeat by the most multitudinous surrender in history.

Auberon's old acquaintances saw little of this; they had no wish to see; their eyes were turned inward and all their feasting was on visions got up by themselves and suffused with home-made colours. Ducat seemed to regard the whole war as an occasion to which the English upper classes had risen memorably. Forty-seven eldest sons of peers, he bade Auberon mark, had fallen in the first year alone. He had by heart a list of famous houses to which they had been heirs, and he described the family portraits. His voice almost broke as he pictured a Duchess of his acquaintance

getting up at half-past five in the morning in her own house for hospital work, and the Duke commanding a training camp under his ancestral oaks—"I don't believe there's a single draft to the front that the Duke does not see off." Even the younger sons of noble families—even those who might in youth have been thought a little idle and careless—well, look at Colin March—what Socialist orator bore on his breast such proofs of gallantry as Colin March?

Then there came Wynnant, immensely tickled by the fervour of certain feuds that would scarcely allow some of the politicians and generals to attend to the war. Lloyd George thought Haig a fool, and Haig thought George a bounder, and Wynnant was told that George had never sent Haig a word of congratulation or thanks for any of his recent victories until October 7—had even sent a message of doubt and discouragement at a critical time. Haig, of course, was a man of honour—he wouldn't retort by intriguing in the Press as French had done when Kitchener had tried to put some guts into him. But our High Command as a whole! And our diplomacy too! It would be sport to see whether upper-class England could live down this failure. "I suppose it can all be hushed up—French's flight and Rawly's cropper in 1916 and the way Hubert Gough was deserted in March, and all the little games played by jackeens like Colin and Claude—why Colin has more rewards for valour than any two men in Europe, bar Claude, and the last German he saw was Lichnowski in 1913."

The whole war, win or lose, scandalised Clement Wade. A world that had produced anything so revolting aggrieved him. His manner towards it was a kind of perpetual washing of hands. He had no way out to propose, but he practised an air of aloofness and spoke of universal insanity and a world rattling back into barbarism. To Auberon it felt as if he and every one else had turned out to be unsatis-

factory sons and Wade was scratching their names out of the family Bible.

Roads knew what he wanted. It would be monstrous, he said incessantly, if the war stopped before we gave Germany a devastated region as big as France's and Belgium's together. Germany had never felt the war yet. We must march to Berlin, if we had to fight the whole way, dictate our terms of peace from Potsdam, hang the Kaiser outside his own door and not come away till we had in our pockets the whole cost of the war, every penny. Oh, Roads was very firm.

Auberon heard them all out patiently, as he had heard so many others, in the last two years, laying down what was best for the world. "Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgement": they could not all be right, as almost every fluent and masterful speaker had once seemed to be while he spoke. Auberon only wished he were as sure about anything as most people seemed to be about everything. The war had let him down, as it had let down most men of courage and clean heart who fought in it. All the early exaltation was out of them now, and the approach of victory was bringing nothing of what their innocence had expected—no sense of having freed or cleaned a world. Somewhere in the rear of our Allied armies, scrubby forces of meanness and cunning, spite and greediness, seemed to be gathering strength; something foul might be done, after all; England might yet be made to look like a base boxer who spits in the eye of the man he has beaten.

The best thing that Auberon's mind found, to stay itself on, was the indestructible soundness of the common sort of man, the stout private who bore all things and dared all things, undismayed in defeat, sober in victory, humorous, tolerant and good-natured at bottom, even when he grumbled most. The only being fit to be ranked with him was the

common German who now had to practise, in hunger and disillusion, exhaustion and bereavement, the difficult virtue of courage without hope. Auberon marvelled at the way the battered German line would draw tight again, like a piece of string pulled at both ends when it has gone loose and wavy, after each dint the Allied onslaughts made on it; here the enemy would fall back, biting all the way, from a salient that had been left jutting out of his line; there he would make a furious counter-attack and break off a salient too boldly thrown out by ourselves. The nearer the war drew to its end, the straighter grew that hard-hammered line, till on the last day of all it was straighter and shorter than it had ever been before. It was tremendous, Auberon thought.

The war's last morning brought him with our leading troops into the little grimy town of Mons where, for England's armies, the war had begun. It struck eleven on a little tinkling church clock in the square, and the British soldiers and the people of the town shook hands and cheered and tasted all they could of the fulfilment of the deep desire that had moved them for more than four years. A German sniper, killed a few hours ago while covering the retreat of his friends, lay under a tree with his hundreds of used cartridge-cases scattered round him. He looked lonely amidst all the rejoicings at the defeat of the cause for which he had been, perhaps, the last man to die. Like many of the dead in war, he had a drowsy, troubled look, as if he had wondered, while dying, "Why has this overtaken me?"

Auberon wanted to do what an English private will do in the ring when he has beaten a plucky opponent at last—put his arm round the stout loser's neck and say, "Good lad!" Why should war be the only ring void of sportsmanship? And yet this morning's General Order to cease firing at

eleven included a clause forbidding fraternisation. Oh, it was all very difficult.

IV

On the night after that day the stillness that reigned from Switzerland to the sea kept many soldiers awake. They were disturbed by the absence of gunfire, as travellers just ashore from long voyages may be put off their sleep by feeling the pulse of no engine throbbing through the walls of their rooms.

In that restless silence Auberon's thoughts went round and round in a circle; they buzzed in his head. Molly and he would soon be free; they would go home; they could meet every day if they chose. But would they ever really meet again—ever be able to talk freely together, in the old way, with this futile secret between them, that both of them knew and that each would be trying to keep from the other? Would she ever be able to think of anything when they talked, except that he must be kept from knowing that Victor had not been killed by that shell? Or he of anything but how to keep from her the way he died six weeks ago? A fate that was not of their making seemed to be forcing them into a course of helpless lying—lies of omission, silence and evasion; and instinct told him already how a lasting lie lodged in the vitals of a friendship must corrode the tissues all round it. Molly might come to dislike him, to fear him, as the person to whom there was most danger that Victor's shame might be known. Why, she might come to wish he were dead, lest he know. But what to do? What to say? Nothing. To say nothing was all he could decently do. And yet to say nothing would be to tell tacit lies, and lying was poison to friendship; so it all went round again in his head till morning came.

It brought the news that his father was not recovering as fast as had been hoped from one of the heart seizures that

he had recently had. "Is there a chance," he wrote, "of your getting leave soon? They seem to think that I may do something abrupt, without giving fair notice. Perhaps I had better be thinking of how to sing Nunc Dimittis. Anyhow mine eyes have seen this victory—a great beginning if only we can keep clean and not lose our heads now. Would my own part had been of more worth, but England, so far, has not failed, nor you, nor Molly."

Auberon saw that he must be dying. The actual pangs of dissolution could not have wrung from the old stoic any more importunate prayer that he might see his son at his death.

BOOK EIGHT

CHAPTER XXVI

I

PEACE, perfect peace, was said to be in the making, somewhere or other, when Auberon saw Molly next, the day before their father and guardian was buried. The physical war had been over for nearly four months; Auberon was a civilian again, released for good from the feeling of walking the streets naked—for so it felt to wear the uniform of those days, plastered with wound stripes, years-of-service stripes, badges and ribbons—a personal history for the public to read.

He had acquired, besides, a new arm which aped with immense success the gestures of flesh-and-blood arms. He had been fairly driven to this. He had entered Brussels, upon his usual business, the day the Germans cleared out, and in the Place St. Gudule a Belgian lady of rank had flung her arms round his neck, at sight of his flapping sleeve, and had kissed him with tears. He had felt thenceforward that something would have to be done as soon as he could find time to go shopping. So now he had this wonderful toy arm; no one would notice now his little deficiency.

As soon as her nursing was over, Molly had taken some "welfare" job with our troops occupying Cologne: only by special leave was she at home to-day, for to-morrow's funeral. Auberon met her train at Victoria. In the station he glanced many times at her face with covert anxiety. Then he said to himself, "She's safe." No doubt, he thought, she was hungry at heart; probably she was feeling that nothing could ever be any good, any more; but there was no trace of wildness about her, of giving-in or of self-pity; she was as simple as water when it is so transparent that, for very clearness, you can't guess its depth.

II

After tea on the day she arrived they sat on the big window-seat of the drawing-room, over the Chantry garden where yellow crocuses were brightening their little flames as the March sunlight subsided. Auberon looked out at them ruefully. "No more Chantry for us, I'm afraid." He told her why. As each year of the war had begun, his father had stealthily sent in to the Exchequer a tenth of the capital value of everything that he had possessed when it began. So five-tenths were gone; and on what remained the Chantry could not be kept going.

"You knew," Molly asked, "at the time?" But really she knew there was no need to ask: Thomas Garth would not have kept his son out of a share in the seemly use of what belonged, in a sense, to them both.

"*You* needn't talk," he said. "Look at the mess that you've made of New Hall."

The big mean house was in sight at the far end of the forest glade that had the river flowing down it. Many little blobs of hospital blue uniform were visible, crawling or pottering about the vulgar mansion in the last sunshine.

"It was of no use to me," she said with evident sincerity. "The rest of us gave things we could spare; your father gave what he couldn't."

That was true, Auberon knew. He could scarcely imagine his father living anywhere but here. With his forehead pressed against the cold glass of the window Auberon gazed again at the garden and the river. Could any one ever love them—every look and every mood of them—so immensely as the passionately self-contained man who now lay in the room overhead with nothing to see or to contain? Things were only as precious as one's own power of prizing them caused them to be: their lustre came out of their

lover's eyes and they were beautiful or dull in much the same measure as he was puissant or puny. "Yes," Auberon muttered, "he toed the line, right enough."

One bad habit of peace is often thrown off in war. People learn to take the death of their friends as simply as may be: there is no time in a battle to force up high notes of sorrow. You blow the froth off the cup of grief and drink the bitter stuff undoctored. So Auberon and Molly now recalled in their everyday voices the ways of Thomas Garth, each wondering to find that what had fixed itself most in his or her mind was lodged equally fast in the other's; how quick he was, in talk, to befriend any one bashful or disconcerted; and slow to give people up as quite empty or dull, however poor a figure they might cut at first; but always a little uneasy, before the war came, for his inviolate darling, England. "Too many passengers; too little crew!" Each of them could remember his saying it more than once, and how, when the smash came, the words had set each of them longing for fitness to man a capstan or haul on a rope.

"That and——," Auberon was beginning, in the great stir of admiration that rose in him now; and then he pulled up on the point of speaking of Victor's winged words in the August night, with the bats whirling and tumbling over the garden. In headlong flight from the perilous topic he plunged at any other he could find and stumbled clumsily into making a kind of rough count of their losses in the last four years—father and Bert and a cousin or two and all Number One Section, and many good men from the village, and school friends or their brothers and husbands. The more they lengthened the list the stronger grew the contrast between the slightness of their ties with some of the ones mentioned last and the poignancy of the one persistent omission. Auberon could not help it: he did not dare mention the name; Heaven knew what straight, smashing

question Molly might ask if he did. But soon he felt that Molly was being as careful as he; she, like him, was trying to steer their talk away from any current that might bring it round to Victor. So, for the moment, this agreed suppression of a common thought widened again the distance between their minds, which their uttered memories of Thomas Garth had been bringing closer to each other. No talk will flow when the talkers' first purpose is to keep something unsaid. They went to bed early on this night of reunion so often, on Auberon's part, thought of and longed for: at least, they went to their several rooms, each, no doubt, to turn out and look over, as well as might be, the broken sticks that seemed to remain of the furniture of their youth.

III

The judgement of God, expressed in terms so drastic as gout and neuritis, kept Lord Wynnant away from the funeral. Colin, however, was there: like a good-natured son he took mental notes of whatever might soothe his father's couch of pain when related, with any advisable improvements, next day. Both had probably liked the Garths as warmly as they could like anybody on earth. But humours are to the humorous-hearted: even in the very temple of sorrow, comedy maintained, for these devotees of her cult, a practicable shrine.

It had been the oddest company beside the grave, Colin said. "No corpse but one could have joined together for half an hour so many whom God had put asunder—Wade and Roads, the rival ventriloquists; Claude and me; smug old campaigners like Ducat and pukka children of light like Auberon and Molly. The Old Stone Man was just like the sun—didn't choose his friends at all—simply shone on the just and the unjust, whichever was there."

Ducat and Mrs. Barbason had met, so Colin reported, for the first time. "They got on famously together—acres of common ground, but charity to the dead was the pick of it. Ducat can't forget, though he forgives. 'Shadows we are and shadows we pursue,' he said to the Gorgonic Barbason, with that damned elegant sadness of his. 'Had poor Garth used all his gifts, he might have died Premier.' The Gorgon wasn't doing anything in shadows. 'Want of balance,' she bawled. 'That was the trouble. He always let his notions run away with him.'"

Wynnant drank it in. It was good for his gout.

Claude and Colin had come in uniform, each of their bosoms ablaze with a polychromatic collection of ribbons dazzling to any eye that knew only the unadorned tunics visible in the trenches. "We braves," Colin truthfully said, "created a sensation the most profound, a sentiment the most respectful."

Wynnant grinned. "The two best embosked *embusqués* in Europe!"

"Absolutely!" said Colin. "And not a word of credit for our genuine qualities. That parson who ran the show yesterday——! Well, seriously the Church of England ought to set her house in order. This blaspheming divine said that there were amongst us to-day"—Colin's voice assumed by degrees the hollow boom of one kind of bad preaching—"the bravest of the brave, men brow-bound with the Roman oak, men whom many Kings had delighted to honour, and yet he—the padre, you know—would venture to say that, even in such lives of peace as our departed friend's, something of courage akin in spirit to that of the bravest might be practised, some labour accomplished, some victory won—you know the sort of *cadenza*."

Oh, yes, Wynnant knew every inflection of bunkum. The picture of Thomas Garth walking, some distance behind,

in the heroic footsteps of Colin and Claude, was good invalid food for him.

Colin seemed to have heard treasurable words from half the mourners. Wade had been pining aloud for the old party business to get back into its swing: football and racing had started again; why not faction fighting? "But Roads," Colin said, "is, in my nostrils, even more niffy than Wade. The dirty dog is e'en nosing round, about Victor Nevin, you know. He tried to pump me in the churchyard. He'll be working up one of his stunts—'A Tragedy of the War' perhaps—some sort of fetid sob-story to go with the sludge in that Sunday paper of his."

"Does any one not know about Nevin?"

"About a million people knew in France—and they're keeping their mouths shut like good uns."

"The Nevins must know."

"I think so. None of them showed yesterday, except Joyce. She had a thick veil and sat right at the back. She must have slipped in after every one else and she bolted away at the end lest people should speak to her. She almost ran down the path from the church—she stumbled on something—because of the veil, I suppose—and went down on one knee and then picked herself up and rushed on, to get away from us all. I tell you, she was tragic."

"Yes." Wynnant took in this vision of Joyce in no unsympathetic way. For of tragedy he was a connoisseur too. "And what," he presently asked, "about the Huntress Diana?"

"Molly? Can't tell a bit. She knows that Victor cut it. Whether she knows he's dead I can't even guess. These enormous things happen to Molly and she just closes over them like a sea."

"Yes. She's like them all. She has containment." Wynnant paused, to make faces, the pains of hell stinging his

limbs more sharply than usual. As soon as this distraction abated, his interest in drama was revived. "Wasn't she," he inquired, "a bit of a toast in her time?"

"I believe you," said Colin.

"Wasn't Follett, the old satyr's son, doing time of some sort—the Jacob and Rachel business—for Molly's *beaux yeux*?"

"Yes."

"And Claude, your twin brother in valour—didn't he cast an eye?"

"He 'also ran.' He didn't finish, though. He cut it in the straight. I caught him looking at her in that church with a kind of damned insolent pity. She's down and he's up—she's a sort of relict of some one who muddled his running away, while Claude's labelled 'Hero,' all over his thorax, for doing it neatly, like me. He'll go somewhere else, where he thinks he'll do better."

"You're mighty serious. Were you smitten, too?"

"*Naturellement.* Who wasn't? I've scratched, though. She can't want another blue-funker. She'll take the other sort now."

"You mean——?"

"Whom but Auberon, the son of the morning, although a slow starter? She mustn't marry beneath her rank, and there is no other man in it. I watched 'em yesterday. The rest of us were apes with blue and red posteriors: those two and old Garth in the oak box were the only three finished humans. And humble, too, begad—they haven't a notion that it's people like them who keep the earth going round while the rest of us play dirty tricks. If they don't rush bang into each other's arms, I shall have to make 'em."

Wynnant listened composedly. He agreed, like some gifted old art-dealing rogue who can appraise with an almost noble rightness a grace quite foreign to himself when he

comes across it in some enskied Della Robbian Virgin or blithe, wise saint of Mino da Fiesole. "They're England, really, these Garths," said Wynnant. "The few that there are of this sort, with no wit to speak of, and no measly fears or desires—loving like spaniels and taking their coats everlastingly off to the first thing that has to be done—it's only they that keep on putting off from day to day the crumbling away of the whole British outfit. They've won the war and scored nothing by it but losses, and now they'll just get down to work, same as ever, next job to hand, and go on preserving us gratis."

Not once in his long career, I suppose, had Wynnant faltered in the policy of grabbing at all he could get, sparing himself any trouble that he could avoid, and letting his country go to the dogs if that were its humour. But he could tell a choice vintage, in wine or in man, the moment he sniffed it—could do it even if that vintage was not then the fashion and never likely to be it.

IV

The faintest flush of green was beginning to animate the thorn hedge round the Chantry orchard on the last evening but one before Molly should go back to her work at Cologne. She and Bron were walking up and down there talking business. How long, he asked, would her present job last?

She didn't know—it was rather absurd—the way they demobilised people; you might be called into an office some day and told to be off the next morning.

"And then?" he asked.

"I shall find work at home," she said quickly. "Anyhow there might be scrubbing to do at New Hall."

"Don't live in that place," he said. He could see her under its high garden wall, with the old peer spewing his filth and the maids grinning from the upper windows. He

knew that she had some money to live on—probably more than he now.

She answered question with question. "And what about you?"

He had a great plan, he said. He was to stand in with an old fellow-corporal, Brunt, in business. Brunt was starting a brick-kiln up in the north, to make bricks for the thousands of houses that would be wanted now, with half the troops coming home to be married. Brunt had been a brick-maker's foreman before the war—a tremendously practical man.

Molly was eager to hear. "What sort of place was it? Jolly?"

"It's striking," he said. "A 'black country,' you know. It looks a bit shelled. They've hoicked most of the bowels out of the earth and left them lying about on the top, with smuts falling on them. Then it rains and makes little trickles of cleanness down the slopes of this muck—like a stoker's face if he cried. It's all rather nice and front-liney."

His journey north, to seal this partnership with Corporal Brunt, had, in fact, done away with the notion, in Auberon's mind, that there ever was a time when England was not fighting a life-or-death war against something which threatened the precarious life of this odd island workshop. In this more durable war the front line had looks that were curiously like those of the other, by day and by night—barrages of smoke and poisonous gas that rolled across blighted Lancashire fields, flames from Midland furnace chimneys that leapt and winked in the dark like the expanding and contracting flashes of many guns on a horizon. He was drawn to these newly discovered firing-lines where a shortage of one hand need not utterly disqualify a man. To get a niche there, to be an N.C.O. in that more regular army of

England's defence, had lately become the thing supremely worth doing; there was the centre of things; the place where the fun was; the only spot where you could feel you belonged, just as it had been on Gistleham Ait before they swam across and explored it. He had almost exactly the old feeling now—that unless he could get at that place, nothing might ever be any good any more.

He told Molly so, with due precautions against her imagining that there was any sort of moral business about it, any self-sacrifice rot. He was after the fun: that was all. He grew so excited in telling her that he forgot for a moment or two the guard on his tongue: he spoke in the old pre-smash way, as if there were nothing that could not be said.

She took it in with the same friendly gravity that had made it easy, twenty years ago, to confide to her any wild project of his. "I think it's a good plan," she said, "to do some sort of work that's quite plain, and live in a very plain place and get right away from everything gaudy and shiny—all the sort of things that used to seem 'brilliant' in the old make-believe time. Do you remember the last day of it all?"

"Before the war came?"

She nodded.

"Don't I!" he said. "You came out through the house to the lawn, with the news. I could hear your step, three rooms away."

"Ah! my old elephant tread."

"No—it was the whole world standing on its toes to listen. And then you came out at last—and even then I didn't see what it all meant till Victor explained——" It was hopeless. Along whatever vista of the past he looked, the figure of Victor stood at its far end. Auberon stopped.

But Molly looked straight at that unevadable figure.

"Yes," she said. "How we listened, you and I! It set me dreaming: that was all; just a luxurious dream of having got into life's very heart. But it set you to work—made you rush off to do the next thing that had to be done, and so you spoke to poor Bert and then I spoke to Victor and he was drawn in."

"Drawn!"

"You didn't see?"

"What?"

"Didn't you hear me crying like a fool that night, very late, up in my room? I thought you must have heard, you spoke so kindly."

"I heard, all right."

"You didn't guess why I did it?"

"I guessed you thought Vick would be killed."

"In action? Cry for fear of that!"

He swallowed the little rebuke; he should have known her pride better.

She relented. "It wasn't your fault," she said. "You couldn't know—Victor and I were alone when it ended."

"What ended?"

"Victor—and all the lovely dreaming. I told him how you had turned his brave words into action. I was sure he'd exult. But it only took him aback. It was as if we had played a trick on him—tripped him up over some little slip he had made."

"My God! He *must* have meant it, Molly."

"Not the way that your father and you mean things you say. He meant it—just as so many beautiful words, to make a few moments feel beautiful—not to get people to do things."

"He tackled the job, though," said Auberon doggedly.

"Oh, he went with you—yes. But it wasn't his act. He was like a poor thing in a trap—he couldn't get out.

And then it all came again—there was a trap again and he couldn't get out. You knew? "

"Yes," he confessed, out of hand. "I knew, Molly, and I never tried to get him out. Somehow I never thought of it. But Colin tried."

"So did I—in a way. But it was no good—no one could get him out then—there was nothing left that he could get out to."

"You know that he's dead?" Auberon asked, urged by some dim impulse to have done with all lying now, uttered or silent.

"Yes," she said. "I almost knew the hour. It was in every one's face. And then Joyce wrote me a letter, a generous, splendid letter. I think Joyce must be one of the noblest persons left in the world." Of a sudden she looked at him sharply. "You didn't hear," she asked, "anything—anything special—about Victor's death?"

He went back on his impulse and lied stoutly. "No!"

She seemed to suspect him. "Don't think," she said, "that things have to be 'broken' to me. I'm not newly widowed. Victor had given me up long ago."

Auberon's eyes, somehow, looked at the ground without his willing it, as though all men were shamed by that failure of one luckless brother. "I had been failing him, too," she went on, "since that night. Of course I couldn't break with him. A woman must often find out, after she's married, that some one is not quite what she had thought. But of course she mustn't cry off. It would be like throwing a husband over because he turned out to be poor—and it can't become fair because one is only engaged and not married. Besides, it had all been my fault—I had expected impossible things."

She had flushed as she spoke, and she had spoken more and more eagerly. It was as if there were something she

had to put right, whatever the effort it cost—as if she were feeling that their previous silence stood in the way of something that must be done or released—he could not tell what and he did not know what to say. All he could think of doing just then was to put his arm through hers and press hers hard against his side — the friendly way that he had always had of communing with Molly in their younger days when the joy of their comradeship was big but inarticulate in them both—deep wanting to call unto deep but not quite knowing how to do it. Then they walked for a long time among the big apple-trees so silently that you might almost have fancied you heard the new sap of the year rising and pushing its way in every stem and twig round them.

CHAPTER XXVII

1

LUNCHEON next day, the last whole day of all, was a lamentable meal. Auberon was destitute of skill in dissembling regrets: with almost comical dismay he felt the minutes of Molly's stay at the Chantry sliding uncontrollably away. Molly's feminine impulse to keep an emotional situation well in hand made her raise many trivial topics. But they were absurdly too little really to fill the places of the things that were too big to be mentioned. And Auberon was wooden and absent, and so all Molly's small safety topics wilted away and they both sat silent and troubled, at the meal's end, till they rose slowly and stood looking out of the big door-window to the garden.

"Flood," he said, as his old custom was of noting these things. The river lay dead low, but a delicate change in its surface texture showed that a young tide was just beginning its insurrection against the weak stream. "Molly," he said abruptly, "we can't go on like this. We *must* do something."

"Yes," she said.

"Coming out in the punt?"

"Yes."

Out of doors it was better. The full breath of spring was not yet in the air, but something else was abroad—a kind of whisper that spring was on the way. The young tide, too, was getting the use of its strength when they manned the punt: tiny trickles of water were rushing about over level patches of foreshore, capturing little hollows and dodging round pebbles with an air of freakish boldness.

The two said nothing more while they worked down Gistleham Reach close to the bank, stemming the weak tide now, so as to ride up lightly on it presently when it should have gathered force. But it was better, Auberon felt, to be

here, and to have something to do—if only trying to punt with one arm, and a curious tool in place of the other. It un-numbed your mind. You could think, anyhow.

No other reach of the Thames below Windsor is quite so lonely, on most days of the year, as that which they were now descending. One or two other reaches may look as if no one had ever frequented them; this one has the strained solitude of a place once full of stir, but now derelict: "How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! How is she become as a widow!" Half a mile off, at the far end of the reach, the vista was crossed, very slowly, by the old ford ferryman's boat: he dipped his sculls with an incredible slowness; like a little figure in some Turner landscape he seemed to sum up the spirit of all this faint pageant of sunken warmth and spent energies.

Auberon had always felt, in an inarticulate way, that quality in the scene. In old days before the war its melancholy would only brace his high spirits the higher as indoor fires are urged on to burn more brightly by frost and wind out of doors. But now the place had changed; the five war years had deepened its solitude; at Misery Point the herons prosecuted their private affairs with an assurance acquired while men had been too busy killing each other to be a nuisance to birds. And he had changed too.

Not that he felt himself much weighed upon by the pervasive expression or scent of many old and beautiful things now abandoned and decomposing composedly. But he did see, for the first time, that this was a possible way of feeling the place; it was a pressure which some people might have to resist; some might find it irresistible. And then his mind settled on the thought of what Molly in particular might feel if she were always to live in that place, in that beastly New Hall, with her losses to count and with life itself seeming, perhaps, like a thing that had once been

on the rise but had passed the top now. Unbearable thought! With his one solid arm he drove his pole furiously into the river's gravelly bed till Molly swayed with the forward leap the punt gave.

II

Whatever your corrosive or fantasticating cares may be, and however short your allowance of limbs, good plain physical labour soon begins to draw you back towards simple and happy consciousness of the body and all its rightful delights; the strong, sane sensuousness of unbedevilled early youth returns upon you, weather-beaten adult as you are, more or less; you walk again in the ways of your heart and in the sight of your eyes. By the time they passed the Chantry again, an hour later, speeding up river on the prime of a rushing tide, both were flushed and breathing deeply; Auberon's big right fore-arm was looking enormous with the blood surging in every vein and with all its working thongs and swells of muscle in full animation: the Huntress Diana was warmed as it might have been with a rattling run through the forest; she panted a little, her deep bosom rising and falling sharply and her face unashamedly beaded as any June morning rose with the dew of Nature in full health.

Auberon marvelled. "And some women cover their faces with flour," he thought, "lest they look as glorious as that!" Aloud he said, "Rest—my old limbs must have rest." A cunning impulse, coming Heaven knows whence and not understood by himself, had invaded him. He had a plan.

And, strangely, she was like one who knew it. "Oh, rubbish!" she said, gaily, but hastily too, as if she countered instinctively some move instinctively divined.

"A breather, then, at least," he pleaded. "The only place for it, in this mountain torrent, is——"

"Home, I suppose," she said, in that hurried way. They had just passed the garden.

"No! The old pond." A deep narrow ditch, now filled by the tide, cut Gistleham Ait into two. Out of this cutting again, at its middle, another narrow channel diverged at right angles; this ran for some twenty yards into the osier-grown lower half of the Ait and then opened out into a round pond, a little lake lost in the midst of the jungly island. Few people knew that this lakelet existed; scarcely any, except Molly and Auberon, knew that after half-tide it could be entered by boat.

She said "Oh!" not exactly resisting—more like one who only takes note, with a deep disturbance of heart, that a tide has set in which may carry far. Already he was swinging the punt's bow round the sharp corner into the cutting.

Out of the hustling main current, the craft moved slowly along the little waterway that fitted it almost like a sheath. The gunwales rubbed against the rank grass on both banks. Once the two had to stoop, to pass clear under a great branch let down by a tree: Molly shipped her pole at that point and did not unship it again; she stood at her end of the punt, passive and waiting, as if, in some curious way, it were not for her to push on with this thing.

That struck him. He could not quite tell how it struck him nor how it bore on his plan—whatever his plan was, for even now he did not see his way clear, nor to what it was leading, but only knew that he must go on and find out and have a kind of recklessness and unreason. He was not sure what kind of recklessness—an active plunge, a taking of risks, or just letting himself be led on and on by the impalpable hand that was holding his and prompting each movement he made. He looked at Molly almost all the time he was pressing the punt along the little channel to where it widened only just enough for the punt to scramble round the corner

into the final cutting and the little land-locked haven at its end.

While he looked at Molly there came a sensation akin, as it seemed, to one that he had felt long ago when rowing in close races: every sense had acquired then a strange exaltation of its powers; he had smelt flowers far off in the fields; he could pick out the voice of each of his friends from the joint roar of all Skimmery running and shouting on the bank. With some such consciousness of a release from the common limits of perception he saw suddenly and exultantly that Molly was agitated : her eyes flickered; they flinched away from his as they had never done in all the years of her elder-sisterly beneficence to him when, more than anything else, their untroubled kindness had denied all hope to his hidden love. She had always been generous, but since the hideous scene at New Hall she had seemed as remote and contained as a star, that gives all it can and takes nothing and is never in need of you or disturbed by you. But now——.

III

The punt was in the little lake by now; it rode idle, almost at rest, with a tiny ripple subsiding under its bows. Molly had sat down on the rising floor at her end and Auberon was just about to sit at his, in their old fashion, when she quickly moved a little to one side and pointed to the vacant space beside her. She did it as if some force resisting within her had first to be overcome with an effort.

He came at the call and sat down, a foot from her. And then it seemed almost as if she did not know what to do with him there, for she looked straight in front of her, over the other end of the punt, though there was nothing out there to see except the low jungle of osiers. Without knowing what to say next, he called her name softly, merely asking her to look his way.

She glanced round at his eager face for a moment and then away, and then again her eyes wavered back to him and away, like the head of some gentle wild creature that wants to come but is still half afraid when you call to it. Right and left she looked away, but always less far than the time before; like a compass needle oscillating to rest on its mark, her eyes settled in upon his and stayed there.

At that surrender he knew less than ever what he should say; the only thing he was prompted to do was to seize a wet hand of Molly's, kiss it a great many times and fondle it with his own and murmur, "My darling, it's come, it's come!" while she bent over the head that was bent down over her hand and kissed the thick hair on its crown.

During the few seconds of that first ecstasy of their coming home to each other, after all the travels of their hearts, they carried on long conversations without a word more. As they sat hand in hand and quite silent there flowed into Auberon's mind, as though through her fingers and his, a narrative of all the changes she had suffered since their early comradeship lost its simplicity; without speaking, she pleaded the pathlessness of the wilds into which a girl has to turn out as she grows beyond girlhood—all the lonely hopes and distrusts and longings for something firm and secure — the whole agitated and diffident world lying behind the delusive rampart of Daphnean reserve and pride that may look like a repelling chain of frozen Alps to an awed lover's eyes.

When thought emerged again into audible speech, they had explained a good deal to each other. "You see," she said, "I'm not fit for you, Bron. You should have some one better—only there's no one could love you so much. I'd begun dreaming about you while it was still wicked to do it—before Victor died. I used to wake up and know I had found out too late and could never be fit for you, and I'm not. I'm

old and I've made my mistake. I'm only something left over out of a mess."

They had stood up by now; so he could put his real arm right round her magnificent shoulders and stem the flow of nonsense at its source. She returned with a sort of humble fervour the mighty hug of the Adam-like lover whose whole and unwasted estate of passion was still his to bring to a bride. So the two unconscious emblems of all that had saved England in war and had now to save her in peace stood enlaced, each of them freed at last from every care but the fear of not being worthy of the other.

THE END

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